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The New Criterion

October 1988

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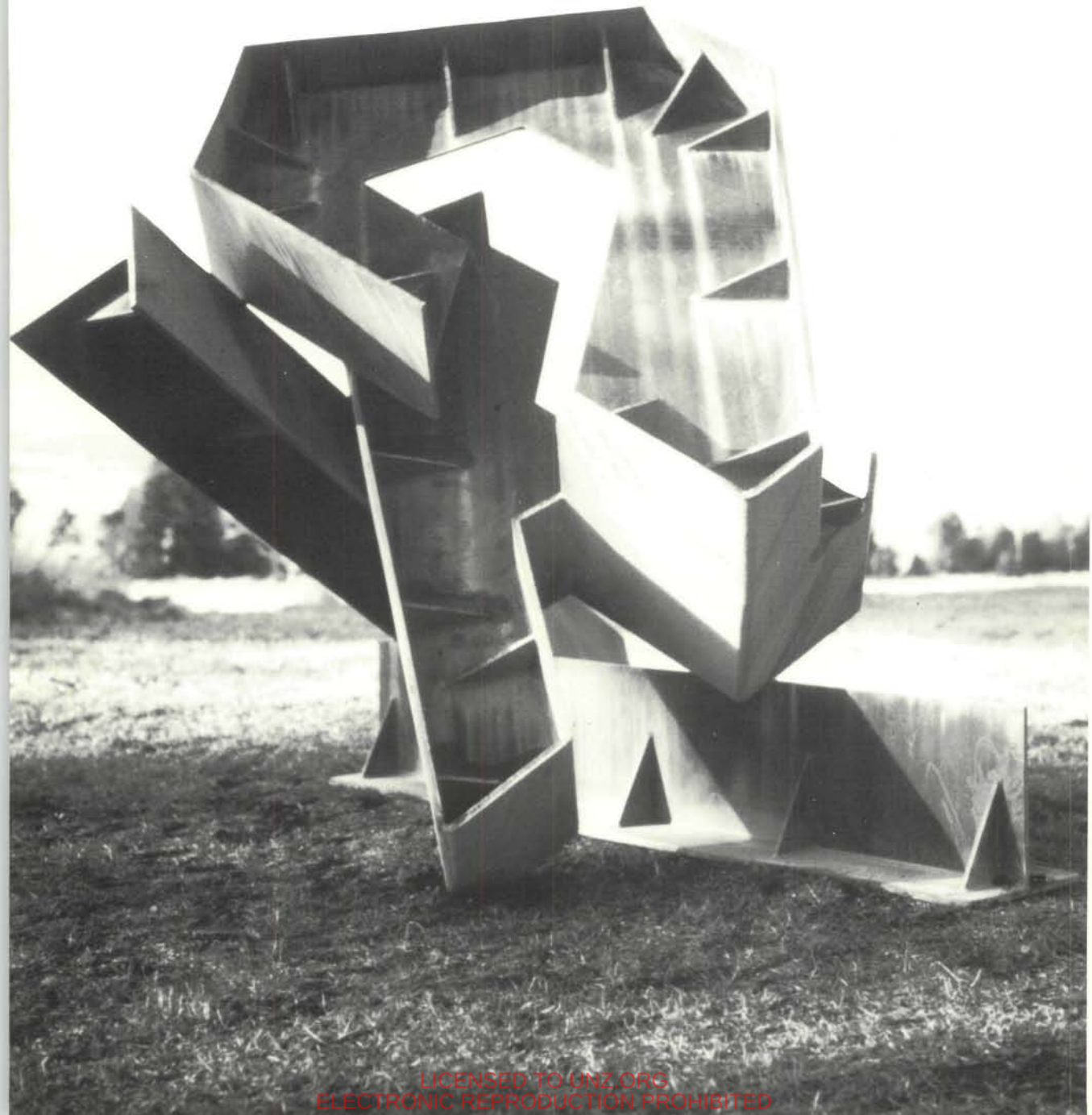

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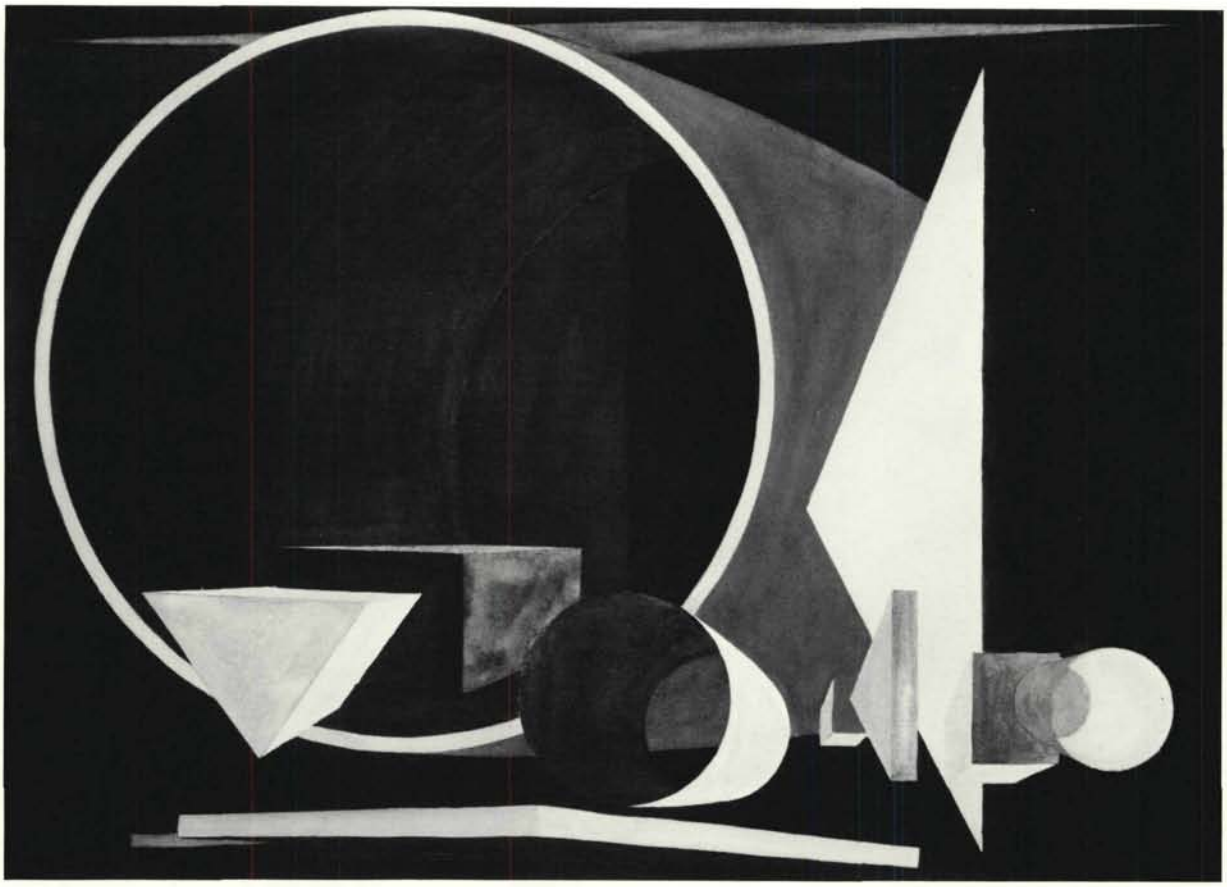

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Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Erich Eichman*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Donna Rifkind*
Office Manager *Maria Garvey*

Contributors to this issue

Brock Baker reviewed Gore Vidal's *Empire* for our April issue.

Bruce Bawer's new book, *Diminishing Fictions,* has just been published by Graywolf Press.

Mark Falcoff is Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

Wallace Fowlie teaches French literature at Duke University. His third volume of memoirs, *Sites,* was recently published. He is at work on volume four.

Eric Gibson wrote on William Tucker for the September issue of *The New Criterion.*

Florence Grossman was a winner of the "Discovery"/*The Nation* contest last year.

Jeffrey Harrison's book of poems, *The Singing Underneath,* was recently published by Dutton.

Jane Kenyon is the author of *The Boat of Quiet Hours* (Graywolf).

Roger Kimball reviewed Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* for our September issue.

Jed Perl's book, *Paris Without End,* will be published this month by North Point Press.

Robert Richman is the editor of an anthology of contemporary formalist poetry entitled *The Direction of Poetry,* soon to be published by Houghton Mifflin.

Denys Sutton was for many years the editor of *Apollo.* His most recent book is *Degas* (Rizzoli).

James W. Tuttleton teaches American literature at New York University.

William Wilborn's poetry has appeared in *Poetry, Yale Review,* and *TriQuarterly.*

Karen Wilkin is preparing a monograph on Georges Braque to be published by Abbeville Press.

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How good was Gauguin?

by Hilton Kramer

I. *The Gauguin myth in the age of media hype*

The process by means of which certain artists—certain modern artists particularly—attain a mythical status that transcends all aesthetic considerations is one that is so familiar to us that we hardly any longer pay it much attention. It is now taken for granted as one of the facts of modern cultural life. This does not mean that the myths themselves have lost their power to influence our thinking about art, but precisely the contrary. Both the myths and the process of mythmaking are now so firmly established in our consciousness that they continue to exert an influence even when the effort is made to discount their effect and rid our minds of their disfiguring fictions.

Yet it is only on a certain kind of artist that such a mythic status can be conferred. Great achievement in art is not itself a sufficient condition; at times, indeed, it is not even a necessary condition. It is life, not art, that confers the status I speak of, and not just any life, of course, but one in which an extreme degree of nonconformity or suffering or violence or saintliness or promiscuity or sheer human oddity is seen to be inseparable from the artistic vocation itself. Matisse, who was probably the greatest painter of the twentieth century, was never a suitable candidate for the role—too bourgeois in appearance, for one thing—whereas it fit Picasso to such a degree that he came finally to see his own life entirely in its terms. Cézanne, with his banker father and uneventful love life, was never a candidate either, though he was a greater painter than either Van Gogh or Gauguin, who now stand for us as the very archetypes of the mythic artist.

It was the writers of popular fiction who transformed the lives of Van Gogh and Gauguin into these archetypes, thereby changing forever—even for those who resist the fictionalization—the way their art would enter our lives. As the protagonists first of widely read novels—*Lust for Life* and *The Moon and Sixpence*—and then of the trashy movies based on them, these two painters acquired an aura that has lent itself to an ever increasing vulgarization with each passing decade. Moreover, it is this vulgarization and not their intrinsic artistic merits that has so greatly transformed the market value of their pictures. Now not even the art museums can any longer be counted upon to act as a bulwark against such a sweeping distortion of artistic values.

It is certainly owing to this mythic aura and the vulgarization it has brought in its wake that it has lately proved to be so easy to divide the short, tragic career of Van Gogh into a series of isolated agons, each of which could be packaged as a separate, highly promotable exhibition melodrama. And since it is now the tendency of the museums to market the materials of high art, wherever possible, as if they belonged to the realm of popular culture, we can probably expect to

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see even worse things in the future. Thanks, for example, to Mrs. Huffington's ghastly biography of Picasso, who can doubt that we shall soon see this artist accorded the ultimate degradation—a television docudrama miniseries certain to be the purest and most lurid soap opera.

Because of all this, it was with a certain feeling of dread that some of us greeted the announcement of a major Gauguin exhibition—a show destined to be mounted on the blockbuster scale—and there was nothing about the initial promotional atmosphere surrounding the announcement to allay our worst expectations. At a posh press luncheon in New York months in advance of the actual opening of the exhibition in Washington, the featured speaker—the one who caused, and was expected to cause, the biggest stir—wasn't a scholar or connoisseur who could shed new light on an artist already so familiar to us, though such experts were briefly heard from, but a movie actor, Donald Sutherland, who had been invited (hired?) to explain to the company assembled at Le Cirque—writers, publicists, museum officials, and AT&T executives (the sponsors)—what it had felt like to *play* Gauguin.

In the event, Mr. Sutherland conducted himself with exemplary dignity and tact, but the quality of the actor's presentation, however admirable, is not the point, of course. It was his presence on such a program that struck entirely the wrong note—wrong, because it was the responsibility of the art museums organizing the Gauguin retrospective not only to place their primary emphasis on the artist's aesthetic achievement but to make every effort to separate his name and his work from the kind of vulgarization that had already done so much to distort the nature of that achievement. By choosing instead to exploit the Gauguin myth at the very outset of their campaign to win maximum media attention for this exhibition, the museums made yet another contribution to undermining the standards that it is their primary function to uphold.

Was it even necessary for the museums to make this obeisance to crass commercial interests? Certainly not as far as the public was concerned. It is my impression, anyway, that nothing in the world—nothing short of a total news blackout, that is—could nowadays have kept a major Gauguin retrospective from being one of the most popular exhibitions of our time. The likelihood is that it was not the public but the sponsor of the exhibition—in this case, AT&T—who needed, or at least wanted, this approach in order to be certain that *its* costly role in the event would receive the requisite visibility. None of us is so naïve as to believe that corporate sponsorship of art exhibitions—or any other cultural programs, for that matter—is ever entirely cost-free. But too little attention, I think, is given to what the actual cost might be both to the cultural institutions which receive the funding and to the public which is supposed to be the primary beneficiary of the sponsor's largess. In the case of public television, for example, we have seen the whole idea of a "noncommercial" medium give way to one in which it is now taken for granted that commercial messages—and sometimes quite elaborate ones—will now be the norm. We seem, alas, to be moving in that direction in the museum world, too. Hence the featured presence of Donald Sutherland at a press lunch for a Gauguin exhibition, for in the advertising business making use of showbusiness celebrities to plug a company name has long been a standard practice. For museums to lend themselves to this practice is not a happy augury.

II. *Separating the art from the legend of the artist*

When we turn to the actual exhibition—the largest, apparently, ever to be devoted to the artist's work—we are reminded, alas, that it was Gauguin himself who was the first to set this process of mythification in motion, and this makes the task of separating the art from the legend of the artist at once more

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difficult and more imperative.[1] As Françoise Cachin writes in her splendid essay for the catalogue of the exhibition: "The hero of his own history, [Gauguin] also saw himself as the hero of painting of his age, which seemed to him decadent." It is important to keep this notion of the decadence of the age firmly in mind in thinking about Gauguin, for it is one of the keys to the artist's desperation as well as to his achievement.

It can be said, of course, that every great modern painter has seen himself as "the hero of painting in his age, which [seems] to him decadent," and to the extent that this is true, Gauguin was certainly one of the principal figures who created this role for the modern artist. It is a role, moreover, that manifests itself *in the work* as well as in the legend. For the pressure to make every painting—every drawing and print and sculpture, too—count as a radical revelation; the horror of backsliding into something merely familiar and already accomplished; the sense of engaging in a fierce competition not only with one's contemporaries but also with one's predecessors and one's posterity; above all, the determination to make of art something absolute and ideal, something from which all the chaff of common experience and conventional feeling has been once and for all time expunged, leaving only the purest aesthetic essence, or what Gauguin himself often called "the abstract," to be experienced in the created object: in all this we are made to feel not only the harrowing and all but impossible nature of the task that the artist set for himself but the role that each fresh assault on the creative enterprise was obligated to play in bringing that task to a triumphant realization.

Not every attempt at the task succeeded, to be sure—not in Gauguin's case nor in anyone else's; but the unremitting pressure is there, all the same, even in the paintings that aren't exactly masterpieces, the paintings that remind us, over and over again, that with Gauguin the will to *be* a certain kind of artist was at times even more important than either talent or vision in enabling him to accomplish what he did. In the work of almost no other modern painter of comparable stature, indeed, are we made to feel so emphatically or so often the presence of the artist's will in determining the momentum of his development, the audacity of his ideas, and the quality of even his greatest pictures. This, too, was a matter in which Gauguin served as a model for the future.

It is this sense we so often have in Gauguin of the creation of art as an act of will that leaves us wondering, even in the face of his greatest achievements, if there wasn't, after all, something rootless and self-determined and artificial in what this renegade from bourgeois life set out to accomplish. Of course it was in the nature of the Symbolist aesthetic that Gauguin so passionately espoused to embrace artifice and indirection as the instruments of revelation, and he was in this respect completely faithful to the spirit of Rimbaud and Mallarmé. Yet this impulse to accord to the artist's will a kind of sacred priority cost Gauguin something as a painter. It is only in an exhibition on this scale that we can see how much remained *un*developed and *un*resolved in his work—that we can see the profusion of ideas that were never pursued and the array of possibilities never explored. There are paintings here—and they tend to come earlier rather than later, from the *Quarry in the Vicinity of Pontoise* (1882) to *Fatata te moua*

1 "The Art of Paul Gauguin" was shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington from May 1 to July 31, and is currently on view—September 17 to December 11—at the Art Institute of Chicago. It moves to the Grand Palais in Paris from January 10 to April 20, 1989. The curators of the exhibition are Françoise Cachin, director of the Musée d'Orsay; Claire Frêches, curator of painting at the Musée d'Orsay; Richard Bretell, formerly curator of European painting at the Art Institute of Chicago and now director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Art; and Charles Stuckey, formerly on the staff of the National Gallery and now curator of twentieth-century painting and sculpture at the Art Institute. The 519-page catalogue produced by this team of curators is available in hardcover at $59.95 and in paperback at $29.95.

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(1892)—out of which other painters, and I mean other great painters, might have made entire careers (and in some cases actually did). That fear of lapsing into the kind of decadence he most despised won for Gauguin his many artistic victories, but did he entirely escape the shadow of the decadence he so greatly dreaded? As a painter, I don't think he did. Which is why, I suppose, that in the end painting alone could not satisfy his aspiration. The last paintings of Gauguin are by no means his best or most original work: that is another lesson of this vast exhibition. In the end he had to turn to words—and to the kind of printed images that are much akin to words—to make his final avowals. The sheer exertion of will could no longer make the art of painting its most direct or satisfactory instrument.

Still, Gauguin emerges from this exhibition as a greater painter than some of us, at least, had thought him to be in the past. He was not what I would call a natural painter. He never commanded the kind of fluency we find in Pissarro and Monet and Degas and Picasso and Matisse. He could take nothing for granted, and there was never anything relaxed or easy in his work—not even in the Impressionist pictures, which sometimes have the character of a lesson to be mastered, a test to be met before he could be released to pursue a vision of his own. He is also an artist who tends to look better and stronger when seen, as he is in this retrospective, in isolation and on a great scale than he usually does in the company of his contemporaries. While his ideas were sometimes profound and even prophetic, his art—dare one say it?—was sometimes shallow, aesthetically shallow in a way that Cézanne's, for example, never was. All of which makes Gauguin an odd kind of classic—an artist who can never quite be relied upon to be great, but who was great often enough to make his place among the masters a persuasive proposition if not always an absolute conviction.

Is it finally possible to separate the art from the legend of the artist? I am not sure that it is. For Gauguin will always remain the painter-laureate of all those members of the middle class, wherever they may be, who harbor the illusion that what is "primitive" or distant or alien—whether it is found in faraway islands and what is now called the Third World or in the underclass of our own society or in our own most cherished fantasies—is somehow more real and certainly less decadent than the common realities of bourgeois life. That this standard of the real is, in the end, itself an illusion does nothing to diminish its appeal, and while that appeal persists Gauguin will remain its poet.

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The "October" syndrome

by Roger Kimball

Few things have contributed more to the debasement of contemporary intellectual and cultural life than the honored place now accorded to deliberate obscurity. Deconstruction and semiology, structuralism and post-structuralism: these and kindred obfuscatory theories imported from the Continent are favored staples in much of what passes for intellectual discourse today. Combined with the unexamined assumption that the realm of high culture—indeed, that the very *idea* of high culture—is irredeemably tainted by political interests, this triumph of opacity has largely succeeded in transforming serious discussion of art and culture into a congeries of hermetic language games.

In our academic journals, university classrooms, and even in our museums' exhibition catalogues, arcane, pseudo-philosophical jargon and radical sentiment compete to forestall genuine engagement with aesthetic or intellectual issues. Alas, only the radical sentiment receives clear and frank expression. Thus even as clarity and intelligibility are spurned as simple-minded, the traditional ideal of disinterested scholarship is bluntly dismissed as a cover for class privilege; at the same time Western culture itself is pilloried as a bastion of unacknowledged sexist and imperialistic attitudes. Given this intellectual climate, it is hardly surprising that criticism should degenerate into a species of cynicism for which nothing is properly understood until it is exposed as corrupt, duplicitous, or hypocritical. Nor is it surprising that the ideal of art as a relatively autonomous endeavor—an endeavor, that is to say, which is free from direct political imperatives—should be ridiculed as a fantasy perpetrated by the entrenched and parochial interests of bourgeois taste. Today, while criticism—or what generally goes under the more impressive-sounding name of "critical theory"—pursues its polysyllabic hunt for suppressed political motives, many artists have likewise adapted themselves to the prevailing *ethos* and have more and more come to see themselves primarily as purveyors of politically "correct" attitudes and politically approved notions of social enlightenment.

There can be little doubt that the primary source of these evils is the academy. For it is precisely the predominance of aggressively opaque rhetoric and political posturing in the humanities departments of our colleges and universities that has validated and, as it were, underwritten the proliferation of such practices. In seeking to understand the origin of this cultural debacle, however, one must not underestimate the role played by those multitudinous and influential props of university life: academic journals devoted, at least ostensibly, to the arts and the humanities. *Diacritics, Critical Inquiry, Tel Quel, New Literary History, Representations, Yale French Studies*: these are a few of the more influential academic organs peddling politicized obscurantism. It is in the pages of such journals that the latest personalities, chic theories, and critical vocabularies are audi-

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tioned and, if found acceptable, are trotted out over and over again until they become verbal tics, part of the atmosphere of academic exchange and requisite equipment for any graduate student or assistant professor with his eye on the grail of tenure. Lacan, Benjamin, Derrida, de Man, Bataille, Jameson, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault—these and a few other names from the current pantheon are scattered like confetti through their pages; "logocentric," "phallocentric," "imperialist," "aura," "strategy," "marginalization," "text," "signifier"—these are some of the more attractive terms that one finds repeated *ad nauseam.*

This is not to suggest that these journals—and their number, be assured, is legion—are all of a piece. Each has its own identifying wrinkle, its distinctive editorial "personality." Yet while none is in any sense popular or widely read, some few have emerged as peculiarly influential and representative of the spirit of politicized obscurantism under which our cultural life currently labors. Of these representative few, none is more political, more opaque, or more influential in certain "advanced" circles than the quarterly *October.* So consummately does *October* epitomize these qualities, and so successful has it been in combining fashionable academic jargon with radical political ideology, that one is tempted to single it out as a specimen case. The publication last year of *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*[1] provides a good opportunity to consider the magazine in some detail, to catalogue its salient features, and to discuss some of its recurrent themes. The more closely one examines its contribution to current intellectual and artistic debate, the more one is tempted to regard *October* not simply as a magazine but as a *syndrome,* as a peculiar set of symptoms that typifies a somewhat amorphous but nonetheless unmistakably prevalent malaise.

Started in the spring of 1976, *October* soon established itself as a cynosure of approved opinions in the confusing firmament of advanced literary and artistic taste. In many respects, the *October* syndrome was already in full flower in the inaugural issue. Here readers were treated to a tortuous lead essay by the much revered Michel Foucault on Magritte's famous drawing *"Ceci n'est pas une pipe"* (surrealism and semiotics: a perfect combination with which to begin *October*). Among other delicacies included in that first issue was an essay by Rosalind Krauss on the video "art" of Vito Acconci, Lynda Benglis, and others—sample sentence: "One could say that if the reflexiveness of modernist art is a *dédoublement* or doubling back in order to locate the object (and thus the objective conditions of one's experience), the mirror-reflection of absolute feedback is a process of bracketing out the object." One also found some notes on filmmaking by Hollis Frampton ("The mode we call reading entails a correct extrapolation of the axiomatic substructure from the artist's immediately apprehensible tradition," etc.), and the first part of a three-part essay by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and John Johnston that pretended to discover thematic similarities between Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Robert Smithson's massive "earth work," *Spiral Jetty* (1969-1970): "In *Gravity's Rainbow* digression becomes the whole through an approach to writing which, again as in Cézanne, unifies all data by insisting on a model which substitutes redistribution for climax."

October's influence and distinctive character owe much to two of its founding editors: Rosalind Krauss, the well-known art critic and Distinguished Professor of Art History at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, and Annette Michelson, the veteran critic and professor of "cinema studies" at New York University. (The other founding editor, the critic and painter Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, left the magazine after three issues.) In the introductory note to their first issue, the editors reveal that the journal was named partly in "cele-

1 *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986,* edited by Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec; MIT Press, 456 pages, $24.95.

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bration" of the heyday of the Russian avant-garde that was inaugurated by the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, partly in commemoration of Sergei Eisenstein's 1928 film *October* (better known as *Ten Days That Shook the World*), which itself was made to commemorate that wonderful event. Indeed, in bringing *October* to the world, they hoped to replicate and abet for our own time that fusion of avant-garde art and revolutionary politics that has been one of the abiding dreams of certain utopian Marxists for much of this century. Despite a promise to include work that is "at times idealist" as well as work that is "materialist," they frankly acknowledged that *October* was inspired by a commitment to the Marxist dictum that art and culture are essentially reflections of economic processes. "*October*'s strong theoretical emphasis will be mediated by its consideration of present artistic practice," the editors assured us. "It is our conviction that this is possible only within a sustained awareness of the economic and social bases of that practice, of the material conditions of its origins and processes, and of their intensely problematic nature at this particular time."

The *October* syndrome not only involves a loving embrace of cultural Marxism, but also, as a kind of corollary, a violent attack on middle-class culture and society, especially in its American varieties. The phrase "intensely problematic at this particular time" already points in that direction, for what the editors mean to imply is that contemporary artistic practice in America is crippled by being insufficiently "aware" of its "social and economic bases." And that's only the beginning. It is a prominent feature of the *October* syndrome that, whenever possible, the discussion of art or ideas is extended to include an indictment of Western capitalist society. Again, the editors' introductory note provides a preliminary taste of the procedure. "'October,'" they write,

> is a reference which remains, for us, more than exemplary; it is instructive. For us, the argument regarding Socialist Realism is nonexistent. Art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions. We will not contribute to that social critique which, swamped by its own disingenuousness, gives credence to such an object of repression as a mural about the war in Vietnam, painted by a white liberal resident in New York, a war fought for the most part by ghetto residents commanded by elements drawn from the southern lower-middle-class.

The contention that "art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions" is something we shall have occasion to consider more closely below; it, too, is an essential feature of the *October* syndrome. (As indeed is the description of a work of art as "an object of repression" and the blithe rejection of the controversy over Socialist Realism, as if that Stalinist interdiction of art were some negligible disturbance in an otherwise glorious cultural and social renaissance.) But the editors' concluding observation is one especially worth pausing over. "Elements drawn from the southern lower-middle-class"? One wonders what these connoisseurs of contempt would have said had they discovered such snobbery and class prejudice in, say, the writings of other white liberal residents of New York.

In any event, *October: The First Decade* provides an even more splendid showcase for the *October* syndrome. The opacity, the radical pronouncements, the obsession with violence and perverse sexuality, the assumption that art should be primarily a form of political activism: it's all vividly displayed in this collection of two dozen pieces. Consisting of essays, mostly, *October: The First Decade* also includes interviews, portfolios of photographs, translations of cultural documents, and a translation of a long poem about sex and language by the German writer Peter Handke. Its contents are arranged under six categories: The Index, Historical Materialism, Critique of Institutions, Psychoanalysis, Rhetoric, and The Body. Something of the tenor of the volume can be gleaned by sampling the titles of its contributions: "The Index of the Absent Stain (Monograph on a Stain)," "Mimicry and

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Legendary Psychasthenia," "From Faktura to Factography," "The Judgment Seat of Photography," "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," and "On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy." Speaking of "The Index," one could have wished that the editors or the MIT Press had seen fit to provide the book with one—and that they had provided some identifying material on the contributors to this volume.

Before turning to the particular works anthologized here, however, we must linger over the volume's prefatory remarks. Alluding once again to Eisenstein's film *October* and the revolutionary *ethos* of the Russian avant-garde after 1917 as the magazine's inspiration, the editors declare that "*October* is emblematic for us of a specific historical moment in which artistic practice joined with critical theory in the project of social construction." In other words—though of course they never put it like this—the term "October" commended itself because of its association with a moment in which art was enlisted in the service of Communist ideology and propaganda. In this context—the context of an "artistic practice" joining with "critical theory in the project of social construction"—they note that the legend appearing on the cover of every issue of the magazine, "Art / Theory / Criticism / Politics," expresses the "conjunction" they seek to realize in the material they publish. But a more truthful advertisement for the contents of *October* would be "Art = Theory = Criticism = Politics."

Like so many people affected by the *October* syndrome these days, the editors of *October* look especially to Russian Constructivism for a model in their struggle against the depredations and superficialities of contemporary Western culture. The deliberate blurring of the boundary between aesthetics and politics, the intoxication of succumbing to vanguard revolutionary sentiment, the rejection of cultural activities not amenable to the cause of the socialist renovation of society: all this recommended the *ethos* of Constructivism to the editors of *October*. Unfortunately, that golden revolutionary moment was difficult to sustain. After one of their frequent assurances that their fondness for post-revolutionary Russia is not colored by "nostalgia" (a prime bourgeois vice, nostalgia), they explain that "we wished to claim that the unfinished, analytic project of constructivism—aborted by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, distorted by the recuperation of the Soviet avant-garde into the mainstream of Western idealist aesthetics—was required for a consideration of the aesthetic practices of our own time." Please note the argument: Constructivism was both "aborted by the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy" as well as "distorted" by being assimilated "into the mainstream of Western idealist aesthetics." Let's leave to one side the dubious claim that the achievement of Russian Constructivism—think only of artists like Malevich and Rodchenko—can be said to have been "distorted" by being assimilated to the idealist tradition of Western art. For our understanding of the *October* syndrome, the important thing is the principle that any criticism of Stalinism or totalitarianism must be ritually followed up with a criticism of the United States or Western culture or capitalist (actually, I believe the required phrase is "late capitalist") society.

One of the central appeals of the *October* syndrome, the feature that perhaps more than any other assures its great contemporary relevance, is its contention that the art and activist politics of the 1960s and early 1970s marked an exuberant reflowering of the kind of revolutionary spirit that enlivened the Constructivist movement in the early years of the Bolshevik Revolution. "The 1960s," we are told, "had witnessed . . . extraordinary developments in the visual and temporal arts: in painting, sculpture, dance, performance, and film." But in order to understand and perpetuate these "extraordinary developments," we are now urged to resuscitate "the kind of critical theory" that burgeoned in the Soviet Union sixty or seventy years ago. Precisely this is the

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task that the editors of *October* set for themselves.

Continuing "the unfinished project of the 1960s" has not, one gathers, been an easy task. For one thing, just when the "extraordinary developments" of the Sixties and Seventies were beginning to get going, bang, a period of reaction set in. Then, too, the dazzling, promiscuous display of new styles and pseudo-styles that marked the period has been misunderstood by others. "We did not see this juncture as that of the vaunted 'death of the avant-garde' and a new 'pluralism.' We saw it rather as that of late capitalism, a time of continued struggle to radicalize cultural practices, and of the marginalization of those attempts through the revival of traditional artistic and discursive tendencies." In the face of this nefarious attempt to exclude ("marginalize") certain artistic practices and to revive "traditional artistic and discursive tendencies"—such "tendencies," be it noted, as easel painting, figure drawing, and writing intelligible prose—the editors of *October* considered their work on the magazine to be "the necessary response to what was *once again* a consolidation of reactionary forces within both the political and cultural spheres" (my emphasis). "Once again"? The previous "consolidation of reactionary forces," remember, referred to Stalinism; this time it refers to . . . well, to American society under the leadership of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

In order to appreciate just how bad things are under the jackboot of American democracy in the late twentieth century, one need only hearken to the plaintive cry of the editors' peroration. It brings together so many of the political features of the *October* syndrome that it is worth quoting at some length:

> We in New York saw our community forced out of the SoHo they had helped to create, forced in turn to collaborate in the eviction of even more marginal populations from the Lower East Side, as the creation of a new art district was conscripted as a wedge for real-estate development . . . . We saw, at the same time, the very artistic experimentation that we had associated with the SoHo community abandoned in favor of the production of luxury objects for consumption and investment, often now by multinational corporations . . . . [W]e watched in dismay as art institutions resurrected the claims of disinterestedness . . . .
>
> Our attention also had to be directed toward the operations within these institutions [the artist's studio, the gallery and museum, the corporate patron, the discipline of art history] of a system of privilege that rewarded the masculine and ignored the rest, that addressed itself to a male subject that it took as adequate indicator of the universal. A radical ignorance with respect to sexual difference had to be confronted. Women had to be written into historical and contemporary cultural practices as producers and as addressees. This task would entail, however, more than a simple retrieval of women from neglected historical archives or the support of contemporary women's work. It would also entail a reconception of the scotoma that kept women from sight not as an impediment to be removed but as a process of vision itself.

So many complaints in so little space! SoHo became expensive; the fledgling galleries of New York's Lower East Side were dupes of the real-estate developers; some of the young artists of the Sixties grew up and began making money (and, what is worse, selling their art not only to corporations but, evil of evils, to *multinational* corporations); some museums turned away from the politicization of art and attempted once more to deal with art "disinterestedly," i.e., as art instead of as a form of political activism; and on and on. Obviously we are dealing with a late-capitalist plot of terrifying dimensions. But while we are on the subject of abandoning "experimentation" in "the SoHo community . . . in favor of the production of luxury objects for consumption and investment," perhaps we should reacquaint ourselves with the opening passage of Janet Malcolm's 1986 essay in *The New Yorker* on Ingrid Sischy (then the editor

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of *Artforum)* and the whole downtown New York art scene. "Rosalind Krauss's loft, on Greene Street," Malcolm began,

> is one of the most beautiful living places in New York. Its beauty has a dark, forceful, willful character. Each piece of furniture and every object of use or decoration has evidently had to pass a severe test before being admitted into this disdainfully interesting room—a long, mildly begloomed rectangle with tall windows at either end, a *sachlich* white kitchen area in the center, a study, and a sleeping balcony. An arrangement of geometric dark-blue armchairs around a coffee table forms the loft's sitting room, also furnished with, among other rarities, an antique armchair on splayed, carved feet and upholstered in a dark William Morris fabric; an assertive all-black Minimalist shaped-felt piece; a strange black-and-white photograph of ocean water; and a gold owl-shaped Art Deco clock . . . .

I think it can be said that Miss Krauss, at least, knows her way around the beleaguered SoHo art community.

Unfortunately, a full appreciation of the *October* syndrome requires that one consider more than the editors' rather programmatic statements about *October*'s inspirations and aspirations. One must also examine some of its chief arguments, recurrent themes, and stylistic habits. Perhaps the single most important contention advanced by the *October* set is the idea that "art begins and ends with a recognition of its conventions." No doubt this statement is susceptible to a variety of interpretations, but when considered as part of the *October* syndrome, it means that our chief interest in art should not be in the art itself—in whatever special perception of beauty or sudden insight it might be capable of communicating—but rather in the "strategies" (to use another favorite term) that the art employs to question its own formal and social presuppositions. In this sense, art becomes a kind of *meta-art*, art whose chief concern is with its social, economic, and conceptual presuppositions, just as criticism becomes meta-criticism, criticism that is concerned more with its own methodology than with the aesthetic substance of art.

Douglas Crimp provides a sterling example of one aspect of this transformation in his essay "The Art of Exhibition." Discussing the Documenta Exhibition of 1982, Mr. Crimp expresses his outrage that credence is given to an idealizing view of art, a view of art that values art for its aesthetic or even its spiritual qualities. (As Miss Krauss once put it in another *October* essay, one not included in this volume, "by now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention *art* and *spirit* in the same sentence.") For his part, Mr. Crimp combats the idealization of art by reminding his readers of the large number of homeless people in New York City and the large number of rats found in a lot next to his apartment building. This provides an occasion to castigate Mayor Koch ("the most reactionary mayor in New York's recent history," etc.) and, of course, President Reagan, and to praise artists like Christy Rupp, who specializes in producing images of attacking rats, and Jenny Holzer, whose "art" consists of slogans pasted on city walls, engraved on stone benches, or immortalized in the flashing lights of electronic signboards. Both artists, Mr. Crimp assures us, stand outside the nasty, inequitable system of established galleries and museums, and both produce "works manufactured cheap and sold cheap, quite unlike the paintings and sculptures within museum buildings." Well, Mr. Crimp is surely correct that their works are "quite unlike" the paintings and sculptures one *used* to find in museums. I wonder, though, if he has been following Miss Holzer's career lately—since, for example, she was selected by a panel of distinguished museum directors and curators to represent the United States at the 1990 Venice Biennale (the first woman so honored), since her picture appeared on the front page of *The New York Times,* since her electronic signboards have been fetching (at last count) between $30,000 and $50,000 apiece? "Protect Me From What I Want," "Abuse of Power Should

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Come as No Surprise": these are some of the artistic masterpieces that have made Miss Holzer famous. She calls them "mock clichés," but I believe she is altogether too modest: they are the real thing, and one only wonders how well she—or her champion Mr. Crimp—feels she is doing at resisting the depredations of museums "whose real but disguised condition is that of the international market for art, dominated increasingly by corporate speculation."

As it happens, there is a good deal about "corporate speculation" and real estate in the *October* reader. Instead of an examination of the art of New York's Lower East Side, for example, we find an essay about the social and economic effects of the gentrification of the area. And instead of an examination of the artist's studio as a place where art is made, we find a dissection of the studio as the material presupposition of art "production." In "The Function of the Studio" we learn that "analysis of the art system must inevitably be carried on in terms of the studio as the *unique space* of production and the museum as the *unique space* of exposition. Both must be investigated as customs, the ossifying customs of art." Why, you might ask, are the customs (presumably, the author means "conventions") of art necessarily "ossifying"? We are never told, but we do discover that "the studio is a place of multiple activities: production, storage, and finally, if all goes well, distribution. It is a kind of commercial depot."

The large-scale shift away from a concern with the aesthetic substance of art helps explain a number of salient features of the *October* syndrome, not least its obsession with photography and film. (There are more pieces devoted to photography and film in *October: The First Decade* than to any other media.) The favored place accorded to photography and film in certain critical and artistic circles today is itself a symptomatic development. What is it about those activities that renders them particularly attractive to a culture at once cynical about the claims of traditional art and infatuated with the exhibitionism and surface glitter of "performance art"? For the *October* set, at any rate, the appeal of photography has little to do with any *aesthetic* claims it might be thought to exert. On the contrary, perhaps the chief reason photography is so highly regarded is that its "mechanical reproducibility" (to adapt a phrase from Walter Benjamin's adored 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") promises to demystify both the work of art as a uniquely valuable object and the artist as a uniquely talented, individual sensibility. In other words, photography and film are so highly touted by the *October* set because they promise to reduce art and artistic creation to the status of a rote, impersonal process. As Miss Krauss puts it near the end of "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," photography "demands that the work be viewed as a deliberate short-circuiting of issues of style. Countermanding the artist's possible formal intervention in creating the work is the overwhelming physical presence of the original object."

A similar set of concerns motivate Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's lugubrious essay "From Faktura to Factography." Mr. Buchloh begins by criticizing the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, for being blind to the true revolutionary content of Soviet avant-garde "production," especially photography.[2] (This, by the way, is another tic that the *October* syndrome has inherited from the rhetoric of Marxism and Russian Constructivism: instead of speaking of making or, heaven forfend, of *creating* art, one speaks of artistic or cultural "production.") Never mind that Alfred Barr did more than any other single individual to bring the art of the Soviet avant-garde, including the art of photomon-

2 It is worth noting that *October* devoted a large part of its Winter 1978 issue to the diary Barr kept while traveling in the Soviet Union in 1927 and 1928. Thus, while *October* is prepared to honor Barr as a kind of pilgrim to the anointed land, in the end they criticize him for failing to understand the cultural and political significance of his own experience.

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tage that Mr. Buchloh so admires, to the attention of the American public: his unforgivable mistake was to view it as . . . yes, as *art*, not as a form of political propaganda. In Mr. Buchloh's view, the real value of the avant-garde photography that emerged from Constructivism was that it "had deliberately and systematically disassociated itself" from the framework of modernism "in order to lay the foundations of an art production that would correspond to the needs of a newly industrialized collective society." In other words, what's so wonderful about a certain species of avant-garde photography is that it allows one to forget about art and get on with the business of "social production."

Mr. Buchloh's essay is also useful as yet another example of how the *October* syndrome requires that every mention of totalitarianism implicate Western capitalism and the United States in the general infamy. He begins by lamenting that El Lissitzky and Walter Benjamin's "media optimism" "prevented them from recognizing that the attempts to create conditions of a simultaneous collective reception for the new audiences of the industrialized state would very soon issue into the preparation of an arsenal of totalitarian, Stalinist propaganda in the Soviet Union. What is worse," Mr. Buchloh continues,

> it would deliver the aesthetics and technology of propaganda to the Italian Fascist and German Nazi regimes. And only a little later we see the immediate consequences of Lissitzky's new montage and photofrescoes in their successful adaptation for the ideological needs of American politics and the campaigns for the acceleration of capitalist development through consumption. *Thus, what in Lissitzky's hands had been a tool of instruction, political education, and the raising of consciousness was rapidly transformed into an instrument for prescribing the silence of conformity and obedience* [my emphasis].

That is, the adoption of montage and kindred techniques in America has been used to prescribe "the silence of conformity and obedience." And if the message was not clear enough the first time around, Mr. Buchloh recapitulates his main point in his concluding sentence: "at the cross-section of politically emancipatory productivist aesthetics and the transformation of modernist montage aesthetics into an instrument of mass education and enlightenment, we find not only its imminent transformation into totalitarian propaganda, but also its successful adaptation for the needs of the ideological apparatus of the culture industry of Western capitalism." No doubt we must be grateful to the courageous Mr. Buchloh for breaking the silence and conformity prescribed by the "needs of the ideological apparatus of the culture industry of Western capitalism." But then shouldn't he and his colleagues at *October* be grateful to such organs of "the ideological apparatus of the culture industry" as the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, both of which have been longtime supporters of *October*? Perhaps a future issue of the magazine will be devoted to explaining why *October* deigns to avail itself of funds from government agencies representing a political system they consistently vilify.

The contributions of Messrs. Crimp, Buchloh, et alia, provide good examples of one side—what we might call the old-time anti-capitalist side—of the *October* syndrome. But while that certainly helps account for *October*'s cachet in the academy and among "advanced" artistic circles, it is by no means the whole story of its charms. Equally important is the more "philosophical" and "cultural" side of the *October* syndrome, a side for which Miss Krauss sets the tone but which has been well served by a number of able imitators.[3]

Of course no such collection as this would be complete without a large measure of feminist rhetoric. One finds it scattered

3 For a more detailed account of Miss Krauss's recent work, see my review of *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, her 1985 collection of essays, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1987), pp. 144-48.

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throughout the volume, but the most amusing—though perhaps also the most frightening—instance is provided by Mary Ann Doane in her essay on feminist filmmaking, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body." Complaining that "Cinematic images of woman [note the singular] have been so consistently oppressive and repressive that the very idea of a feminist filmmaking practice seems an impossibility," Miss Doane proceeds to explore the ways in which a self-respecting feminist might go about the business of making films. It's a tough job. For one thing, since in Miss Doane's view "the essence of femininity is most frequently attached to the natural body as an immediate indicator of sexual difference, it is this body which must be refused." Yes, it is difficult to film women—or Woman—without a body. Or is it? Miss Doane assures us that "the body is always a function of discourse," so perhaps one could fill up the screen with "signifiers"? But the real problem, one gathers, is that the inescapably mechanical process of making films is a threat to a woman's sexuality. As Miss Doane explains, "A machine for the production of images and sounds, the cinema generates and guarantees pleasure by a corroboration of the spectator's identity. Because that identity is bound up with that of the voyeur and fetishist, because it requires for its support the attributes of the 'noncastrated,' the potential for illusory mastery of the signifier, it is not accessible to the female spectator, who, in buying her ticket, must deny her sex." Miss Doane notwithstanding, it does seem odd that a journal that has, shall we say, "fetishized" photography and film should publish an essay denouncing a trip to the movies as something fraught with ideological danger.

The cultural side of the *October* syndrome is not confined to feminism, however. For sheer pretension, one of my favorite pieces was Georges Didi-Huberman's essay on the Shroud of Turin, "Index of the Absent Wound (Monograph on a Stain)." "What we need," muses Mr. Didi-Huberman,

> is a concept of figurative *Aufhebung*. We would have to consider the dichotomy of its field and its means, and how they deploy a dialectical mimesis as imitation of absolute knowledge; how it attempts to transform sensible space and to begin a movement (Hegel would have said automovement) in the direction of certitude, figural certitude. An absolute seeing that would transcend the scansion of seeing and of knowing; an absolutely reflexive representation . . . . We have to look at this stain again, but this time with the "foresight" of such figural certainty in mind, or its "phantasm," its *phantasia* in the Hegelian sense; for Hegel considered *Phantasie* an *Aufhebung*, and spoke of the movement of truth as a delirium of absolute translucidity.

Lest the reader be puzzled, Mr. Didi-Huberman supplies an explanatory reference: "Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*." The translator and publication data are listed, but no page number. Students of Hegel will perhaps hazard that Mr. Didi-Huberman had in mind the passage from the preface to the *Phenomenology* where Hegel speaks of "the true" being "the bacchanalian whirl in which no member is not drunk." But who knows? He at least is never troubled to say.

This sort of thing is standard practice in the pages of *October*. As in so much contemporary academic writing, arcane references and wild generalizations are thrown around wholesale. One soon realizes that the footnote to Lacan, the invocation of Foucault, of Freud, of Benjamin, the entire (dare one say it?) superstructure of "scholarship" erected in these essays is intended not to further knowledge but to dazzle the reader. Why, for example, does Joel Fineman feel called upon to parade the first line of *The Iliad*, unidentified and untranslated, as an epigraph to his essay on "The Structure of Allegorical Desire"? How many of his readers will be able to read the Greek? Not many, of course, but that is perhaps just as well since the line is slightly miscited, as indeed are several of the Greek words with which Mr. Fineman decorates his essay.

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Or consider, as a final example, Homi Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," an essay that, we are told, was first presented in 1983 at a meeting of the Modern Language Association. Warming up with some reasonably benign reflections on "the discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism," and so on, Mr. Bhabha quickly gets down to business: "Within the conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination—the demand for identity, stasis—and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history—change, difference—mimicry represents an *ironic* compromise. If I may adapt Samuel Weber's formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration . . ."—but, no, let's leave *that* formulation to one side and continue with some of Mr. Bhabha's concluding remarks.

> In the ambivalent world of the "not quite/not white," on the margins of metropolitan desire, the *founding objects* of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental *objets trouvés* of the colonial discourse—the part-objects of presence. It is then that the body and the book loose their representational authority. Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body.

There is something terribly pathetic about this sort of display, composed as it is of nothing but clichés and phrases echoing the likes of Melanie Klein, Edward Said, and Roland Barthes—though whether Mr. Bhabha is fully aware of his sources is unclear. The cruelly ironical thing about this essay on mimicry and colonialism is that it is itself nothing but a second-rate mimicry of the clotted academic rhetoric that passes for scholarship in our universities and journals. That this rubbish should be presented as a "paper" at the Modern Language Association is a somber reminder of how far that venerable organization has degenerated.

There is a good deal that I have had to leave out of account here: Georges Bataille's jolly discussion of the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, for instance ("Death, for the Aztecs, was nothing," Bataille tells us), and Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi's meditations on the murder of the poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, where we learn that "the death of the opposition sexualizes intensely the life of an entire society, from the dark bowels of fascism to the violence whose language is expressed . . . by the deadly call to aphasia. Is the social link paranoiac?" Who can say?

I have also unfortunately had to leave out any consideration of the more recent manifestations of the *October* syndrome. In the Winter 1987 issue of the magazine, for example, the conflation of culture and politics takes a further step in a large special number devoted entirely to AIDS. The example it provides of how even a disease may be politicized and recruited to serve the cause of radical politics merits careful attention. Once again, Mr. Crimp, who edited the issue, manages to produce one of the more extraordinary comments when he argues, in a discussion of "safe sex," that "they insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact *it is our promiscuity that will save us*" (his emphasis). How exactly this salvation is to be effected through promiscuity is difficult to say, but Mr. Crimp obviously has great faith in "gay male promiscuity . . . as a positive model of how sexual pleasures might be pursued by and granted to everyone if those pleasures were not confined within the narrow limits of institutionalized sexuality."

Clearly, though *October* is often opaque and unintelligible, it is not utterly bereft of sense. If one has sufficient patience, something resembling a consecutive argument can often be wrested from the tangled, jargon-ridden prose favored by most of its contributors. And on political matters—matters, I mean, involving elected officials, government policies, and the like (since everything is regarded as political by the *October* set, the distinction is important)—the essays included here obviously tend to be

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about as direct, but also about as unconvincing, as the harangues of a soapbox preacher. Reading through so many pages of *October* brought to mind a remark made years ago by the great intellectual historian Basil Willey. Discussing the work of Sir Thomas Browne, Willey observed that Browne's literary style "was the incarnation of his sensibility." Style, indeed, is often the incarnation of sensibility. And reflecting on the style of the *October* syndrome—on its opacity, its humorlessness, its pretension, its utter disregard for common sense—one cannot help concluding that it is a sensibility for which art and culture exist and have value only as appendages to political ideology. *October* began by promising to revitalize art and culture by instituting a new level of critical analysis and receptivity. After more than ten years of publication, it has demonstrated that it is only one more example of politicized academic arrogance illegitimately claiming to speak for the artistic avant-garde.

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Remembering Léonie Adams
by Wallace Fowlie

The setting is one of the faculty houses on the campus of Bennington College in Vermont. The time is the end of the school year, June 1936, and the end of the last literature faculty meeting. We were trying to turn it into a mildly festive gathering. The business matters had been put aside (academic business matters are never terminated). But we were tired from the end-of-term papers, last conferences with counselees, and from the idea of the commencement weekend rites, to begin the following day.

The critic William Troy and his wife, the poet Léonie Adams, had joined the Bennington faculty in 1935. They had come to us from Washington Square College of New York University, and had weathered very well their first year at the college. Those of us who had been teaching literature for a few years at Bennington were proud they were with us. We had grown to admire them as teachers and new friends. We knew, better than other members of the faculty, better than the students, their literary achievements and what those achievements promised for the future. I sat facing them, Bill and Léonie, and sensed the fatigue in the other three teachers: Kenneth Burke, the oldest and the most eminent, Stanley Edgar Hyman, one of Kenneth's foremost admirers, and, the youngest of us all, the poet Ben Belitt, who several times through the year had spoken to me passionately about Léonie's poems.

There had been a brief silence in the room, as we put papers away. Then Bill turned to Léonie, as he joked a bit about our obvious despondency. He seldom asked Léonie to do anything in a public way, but the meeting was not really public: we were a close-knit, harmonious faculty group.

"Why don't you read," he said to her, "what you did last month when we called on my sister at her convent. Sister Camilla was delighted with it. It might help perk us up."

We were surprised to learn that Bill had a sister who was a nun, and wondered what Léonie had read to her. We of course seconded Bill's suggestion. She hesitated just a minute or two, and then nodded her head. She was going to read something. We quieted down and waited in great expectancy.

Léonie raised her head, and, without looking at any one of us, spoke in a strong voice she had never used in my hearing. There was no book on her lap or in her hand. She began reciting in that clear loving voice of hers:

> Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more,
> Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never sear . . .

Ah! It was *Lycidas*. We recognized those lines from Milton. She continued to recite with varied intonations the entire pastoral. We were able to follow it so easily: the shepherd speaking his Doric lay in ancient Greece, and the implied reference to Edward King and his death by drowning in the Irish Sea. From Greece we moved to that other

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age when Léonie emphasized "the pilot of the Galilean lake."

The spell we were under was not broken until she spoke the last line: "Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new." She recited all hundred and ninety-three lines of *Lycidas* quietly, movingly, as if she were celebrating the event of death and the life of nature that was its setting. Her voice changed as she moved from the Aegean to the Sea of Galilee. Milton's memory had become hers during those minutes when the words of the poet held us as steadfastly as the voice of the reader . . .

And now, fifty years later, and just a few days after Léonie's passing—on June 27 of this year—I am remembering the spell she cast over us that long-ago June day on a Vermont hillside. She caused our weariness to turn into attentiveness. Through the words of the poet, and through Léonie's devotion to poetry, she raised us to a new understanding of why we were there in that particular place, at that particular time.

Certainly, throughout the year, we had felt something of that spiritual power in Léonie. Her spirit had always seemed to us unaffected by trivia, unaffected by the worries that all of us felt as we taught in a school of such rigorous doctrine, where every utterance we made was examined and judged. Léonie was above pedagogical doctrine. She had no need of it. The purity of her spirit was the doctrine she followed. The students had begun to feel this, and we her colleagues and friends basked in that early recognition of the students.

We amused her, teachers and students alike, in our puzzled nervousness. I had watched her as she looked at Bill when, in our faculty meetings, he would rant against a stupid rule. He intended to uproot it, and yet he knew that all the obscure forces of the institution were against him. Somehow Léonie knew that teaching was quite simply communication between two human beings. For its consummation, each one, teacher and student, had to sharpen his mind and his heart so that there would be communication on the highest possible level.

Léonie made no effort in her speech to argue or discuss, because in her thoughts the matter had been solved, and she looked forward to quieting down the irascibility of her husband and his male colleagues. How we needed that feminine spirit! How it helped deflate our momentary scenes of wrath!

She presided over our tempers and silliness, as she presided over the vegetables in her small garden as they sprouted and grew to that moment of perfection when she could take them into her kitchen and prepare them skillfully for Bill—and for Ben and me if we had the good luck to be invited to dinner. Ben's great admiration for Léonie helped me to measure mine. Ben and I were the bachelors on the faculty. We matched one another in our devotion to Léonie, and talked with fervor about small details in her speech and behavior. Quite seriously one evening, after leaving the Troys' apartment, we spoke of the magical way she had cooked a red cabbage!

Ben was familiar with the vegetable, but I was not. It was a gastronomical novelty to me as I savored the taste and asked Léonie how she had cooked it. The question must have seemed ludicrous to her. She had boiled it in a big pot, and then cut it up and served it with butter and a few herbs. She looked at me quizzically with a smile that said: "Are you serious?" She did add, however, "Bill likes red cabbage." Every meal was primarily for him. I was convinced that he was the most spoiled male in Vermont.

As we enjoyed the cabbage, the rice, and the small pieces of lamb, literary talk started up. Bill and Ben usually disagreed in their opinions about a new book that Bill had just reviewed in *The Nation*. I would insert a few remarks to keep the quarrel going. Léonie listened and seemed to be forever hoping something significant would be said. If any slight error was made, in fact or quotation, she would then intervene, almost under her breath, and thereby prove that she had looked at the book in question, and had read Bill's review very carefully.

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Long after William Troy's last illness and death in 1961, Stanley Edgar Hyman edited and published his *Selected Essays* (Rutgers University Press). Léonie had preserved all of Bill's writings: the seventy-odd articles and reviews he had published during his lifetime, many of great distinction, and a few unpublished pieces. Léonie knew their worth, and she cherished Bill's critical method, so apparent in his articles in *The Nation* during the 1930s, and in the literary quarterlies in the 1930s and 1940s. As Hyman says, Bill's "mad Irish perfectionism" kept him from publishing a book of his writings.

The poet's art of Léonie and the critic's art of Bill were two different worlds of literature. One of their most noble traits was the respect and the admiration that each felt for the other's work. Literary quarrels, in the oral tradition, abounded between Bill and Léonie when their friends visited with them, but each faithfully and sincerely praised the literary achievement of the other.

One evening at Bennington, Bill, who often spoke in a somewhat pontifical manner, made a statement as if it were orthodox doctrine: "We recognize great poetry by its genuineness, by its concreteness, and by its definiteness." Léonie had moved to the edge of her chair as she had listened. She had certainly not expected to be brought into this very sound, but histrionically expressed, belief of her husband. Bill, at that moment, turned to her—this was unusual because in public he often seemed to ignore her—and said: "Léonie, your poems have those qualities." It was an ecclesiastical nod of approval. (I had once told Bill that if he had been born one hundred years earlier, he would have become a cardinal in the Church. He laughed, but he was pleased.)

Whatever Léonie touched had the shape of perfection. It might be one of her poems or the carefully aligned vegetables in her garden or the manner in which she read Milton or Hopkins. We could only imagine the quiet, reserved skill of her teaching. Bill was looked upon as a man favored by these examples of perfection joined to his life: poetic, gastronomic, pedagogic, horticultural. All of these achievements were performances, in a way, carried out inconspicuously, effortlessly. Bill's role at Bennington was that of a very impressive teacher. He was eloquent and inspiring when he was teaching one of his favorite books: *Ulysses* or *Le Rouge et le Noir* or *Madame Bovary*. When, in conversation, he had lapses of memory or made slight mistakes, Léonie, never too passive, never too overawed in his presence, would correct him in just a few words, specific words that startled him and momentarily irritated him. Only Léonie dared to do this. Certainly no student, no colleague would attempt to put Bill Troy down.

During one of their years at Bennington, the Troys occupied an apartment in the "Hall House" in Old Bennington. The First Church, white and stark, opposite the Hall House, had been restored inside and out. Robert Frost and the members of his family are buried in the cemetery behind the church. The tombstones forming the first line behind the white fence of First Church, lining Monument Avenue, are the oldest. I had often noticed and read to myself the epitaph, carved in stone, that marks the grave of the first pastor:

> In memory of the Revd. M. Jedidiah Dewey
> First Pastor of the Church in Bennington . . .

After the date of his death, *Decmbr 21st. 1778*, there were six lines of poetry:

> Of comfort no man speak!
> Let's talk of graves, of worms,
> And epitaphs, make dust our
> Paper, and with rainy eyes,
> Write sorrow on the bosom
> Of the earth.

I had admired the beauty of those lines. One day at lunch in the college commons, I mentioned them to Bill Troy, and asked if he did not agree that they sounded like the best eighteenth-century English verse. He replied that he too had been impressed with the poetry on Jedidiah's tomb, and when once

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he praised the lines to Léonie, she quietly answered, "They should be good. They are from *Richard II*."

I had often wished I might listen to Léonie teach poetry, but never asked her if I might attend the lessons. As far as I know, no one else made such a request either. But on one occasion, in the Troys' apartment in Old Bennington, I had the good luck to discuss with Léonie and Louise Bogan a difficult poem of Mallarmé. In the literary world at that time, especially in New York, the names of Louise Bogan and Léonie Adams were often joined. They were friends, and their work had been recognized at about the same time by the practicing poets.

The college had invited Louise Bogan to give a reading of her poems. It was a successful performance, and Léonie was gratified. The following evening I was invited to dine with the Troys, who were entertaining the visiting poet. Bill retired early, immediately after dinner. He was suffering from a form of indigestion that often plagued him. I stayed on with the two ladies. When Miss Bogan asked me which French poets I was teaching, I told her of my struggles over Mallarmé with a small group of senior girls. She was immediately interested, and I seized the opportunity to tell her about my efforts that afternoon as I prepared a class on the sonnet "M'introduire dans ton histoire." "No title for that poem," I said. "You have to make some sense out of the first line." At that remark Léonie and Louise smiled at one another and reported that once in New York they had worked together specifically on that sonnet, intrigued, as I suppose everyone is, by the mysterious first line.

Then, without any copy of Mallarmé at hand, they rehearsed the sonnet line by line, resurrected it integrally, and, before making any strict interpretation, simply enjoyed the beauty of the lines, delighted with their faithful memory. They brought everything more clearly into focus than I had been able to. They loved the mythic reminiscence of the timid hero touching with his bare heel a plot of grass. I had that afternoon sensed the allusion to Achilles, vulnerable only in his heel. Then Léonie pointed out that the moment of conquest for the Mallarmé hero will be a mortal wound or a dying. The line they remembered best was the sun-chariot mounting in the sky, and then sinking down into a ruddy glow. They called the "thunder and rubies" *(Tonnerre et rubis aux moyeux)* the sacramental flashes of combat. We did not know at that time that T. S. Eliot, in his first quartet, *Burnt Norton,* was going to adapt that Mallarmé line into:

> Garlic and sapphires in the mud
> Clot the bedded axle-tree.

I felt goaded on by my excitement in hearing Léonie and Louise analyze the lines of Mallarmé, and I asked them at the end how they would summarize the sonnet for a class attempting a first reading. Léonie spoke directly to my question when she said: "Mallarmé avoids any direct narration, any specific allusion to the original experience, whatever that was. But the sonnet is the celebration of an experience. It is really the sonnet of a hero and not of a lover."

Walking home that evening through the dark of the Bennington night, I was jubilant with thoughts that I had been enlightened about the sonnet. In the afternoon I had thought of the sonnet as celebrating a sexual conquest. But now it was also for me the course of the sun: a flaming sunset sinking into its own death.

Only once did Léonie talk with me about Paris. I knew that she had spent a year there on a Guggenheim Fellowship, but I had not found the right moment to ask her about her Paris experiences. Not until one evening . . . I was to have dinner with Bill and Léonie. Bill was late in getting home from some counselees in his "barn" office at the college, and Léonie asked me if I would like to have a drink before dinner. "If you have any vermouth, that would be just right—with some ice," I said.

When she handed the glass to me, she smiled and said, "Vermouth always brings back to me my year in Paris."

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This was my chance and I asked: "Which was your Guggenheim year?"

"It was 1928." I did not want to interrupt her by saying that my first visit to Paris was the summer of 1928. But I did ask if she was there during the summer.

"Yes, I did almost no travelling that year. I enjoyed living in Paris, although I was very lonely there. Every afternoon, late in the day, I went to the one café I used, the Dôme in Montparnasse. I had a corner table that always seemed empty, and ordered the same drink day after day, from the same waiter. He was a friendly fellow who grew accustomed to my being there at the same time each day. He saved the table for me. I don't drink and had been told that vermouth was the mildest of drinks. So I ordered it each day. It seemed more sophisticated to me than a *citron pressé* or a cup of tea. The waiter and I always exchanged a few words. He was the only person with whom I spoke French. After two months of sitting at the Dôme and watching the people go by on the wide sidewalk, the waiter one day, when there were very few people seated at the café, said to me as he put the glass on my table, 'Madame, do you order vermouth because you believe it to be a harmless drink?'

"'Yes, that is exactly why I take it.'

"'But, Madame, it is far from being harmless. It is addictive. If you continue much longer ordering a glass of vermouth every day, you will become an addict. Vermouth is from the absinthe plant. It is the substitute for absinthe because that drink is by law now forbidden in France.'"

Léonie's beautiful small hands had the sprightliness, the liveliness of a lizard in the ruins of a wall. Whatever she observed was seen from an unusual angle, and under a strong light that would throw it into relief. That angle and that lighting protected her poems from any torrential lyricism, as they protected her daily speech.

My generation paid her too little attention. But beginning with the generation of her students at Bennington and at Columbia, and continuing with today's young students of poetry, her genius was discovered and will be re-discovered. During those Vermont years when I lived close to her—at times just a field separating us, at other times three or four miles of road—I was unaware of how much my observations of her meant, how much I learned from our encounters, even very brief ones. She never wandered about, as some of us did, in those woods and back roads. She never grew tired, she never rested. There was no sign ever of disorder in her thinking or in her words.

In my own mind I used to call her "la princesse de Clèves." At that time I was studying the novel of Mme de La Fayette and was delighted to find traits of the princess in Léonie: her reserve, for example, simple but never extreme. I often wondered what she thought of her courtiers—for we were that—eager to have some brief thought spoken from her heart. She loved the spring, and, in memory of the French novel, I would convert the Vermont spring into the richer spring of Touraine. I converted our simple houses into marble staircases, and our faculty meetings into palace intrigues and tournaments. All of these vagaries I kept to myself. It was necessary to tame them as I felt I was moving closer to some understanding of a poet's spirit . . . So many years pass before we learn how to accept the privileges of our life.

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Léonie Adams, poet

by Bruce Bawer

When the poet Léonie Adams died last June at the age of eighty-eight, she had not published a book in thirty-four years, and had not been near the center of the literary action for over half a century. At one time her work had been included, as a matter of course, in the major anthologies of modern American poetry; by the 1980s, however, her name had virtually disappeared from the literary record: none of her poems appear in *The Norton Anthology of American Poetry,* and even David Perkins's encyclopedic *History of Modern Poetry,* which finds room for everyone from Richard Hovey and Robert Hillyer to William Vaughn Moody and Alfred Noyes, manages to omit her. Given this state of affairs, perhaps it was only to be expected that the headline of her obituary in *The New York Times* should have read not "Léonie Adams, Poet" but "Léonie Adams, Poetry Consultant." (Among the many honors that Adams received during her career was the consultantship in poetry to the Library of Congress in 1948-49.) Such ubiquitous neglect of Adams's oeuvre by the literary movers and shakers of our time is not only unjustified but truly lamentable, for more than a few of her poems remain powerful and affecting, and certainly a good deal more accomplished than much of what passes for first-rate verse nowadays.

It was during the 1920s—the height of literary modernism—that Adams knew her greatest fame. At that time, the American poetic landscape—which was then defined largely by such high-powered and singular talents as Eliot and Frost, Cummings and Moore, Robinson and Sandburg—was also graced by the presence of a number of elegant lyric poets whose art was of a considerably more tempered and orthodox character than that of these robust figures. Among the lyric poets, all of them women, were Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie, and Louise Bogan; and it was Léonie Adams who, in the opinions of some critics, ranked first in this company. Edmund Wilson's 1926 verdict of her debut collection is representative of the enthusiastic attention that her work once routinely received: "Léonie Adams's *Those Not Elect* is a very remarkable book, of which the language, which seems to branch straight from the richest seventeenth-century tradition, strikes music from the calm summer starbreak, the bright-washed night after rain or the blue translucence of evening, where a gull or a pigeon that flies alone, seeking freedom in that space and clarity, is lost in a confusion of cloud and light."

The first thing one notices about this sentence is that, for Wilson, whom one ordinarily thinks of as a prose stylist of spare, no-nonsense eloquence, it is astonishingly—and not altogether successfully—poetic. But anyone familiar with the verse of Léonie Adams can well understand the genesis of such a sentence: to read her for any length of time, and with any sympathy at all, is to be possessed, in spite of oneself, by her characteristic images, vocabulary, and

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syntax. It is a possession that could hardly be avoided, for Adams's poetry is notable at once for its extremely narrow range of both subject matter and manner of treatment, and for the impressive (if not quite perfect) command that Adams exercises within this limited territory. One comes away from a volume of Adams's poems almost forgetting that poetry isn't always dense, solemn, and elliptical, almost forgetting that there are other poetic themes than the frailty of beauty, the difficulty of love, and the mortality of man, almost forgetting that whole books of verse have been written without reference to the moon and stars, trees and leaves, oceans and clouds, birds and their song, the heart and its quaverings. Simply to read the table of contents of Adams's collected poems—which contains such titles as "Words for the Raker of Leaves," "Grapes Making," "When Green," "Nightpiece," "The Apple in its Season," "Light at Equinox," "O Grave," "Dirge at the Edge of Woods," "Sundown," "Twilit Revelation," "For Harvest," "A Wind of Fall," and "April Mortality"—is to perceive that this is a poetry which makes frequent use of natural images to speak metaphorically of the essential things: of life and death, time and the seasons, evanescent man and the enduring landscape. It is a poetry whose chief contrasts are between youth and old age, spring and autumn, sunrise (when "[t]he day comes wildly up the east") and nightfall (the hour of "heaven's descent"), a poetry in which the sky figures consistently as a symbol of heaven (often, indeed, Adams speaks of "heaven" or "heaven's seat" instead of "sky") and the earth as an emblem of everything that abideth forever.

Adams's manner of deploying such images is demonstrated in "Twilight of the Wood," originally published in the second of her three collections, *High Falcon* (1929):

> Leaf is no more now than corruption's scent
> But beautiful are the trees above their dead,
> This hour with their summer beauties spent,
> When desolate of the thousand sweets they
> shed,
> As to that last and western rite made bare,
> Their boughs let drop the amber-yielding cup
> That leaves no stain upon the crystal air;
> And thinly in their midst a tune goes up:
> Then who might sing in all the muted wood?
> Its waters locked, no single bird, no leaf;
> It is not higher than the living blood
> Will sound in bodies stone-dull with grief;
> And thus, when death has taken all the rest,
> Life's self is heard within earth's icy breast.

In its austere and occasionally quaint diction and rather convoluted syntax, in its quiet intensity of tone and personification of the earth, in its dramatic abstractions and immodest particulars, in its sonnet form and conventional rhyme words, and in its imaginative arrangement of non-human images as a way of speaking upon a theme of great human concern, "Twilight of the Wood" is a representative Léonie Adams poem.

Its language, too, is typical of Adams. Wilson compares Adams's language to that of the "richest" seventeenth-century poets, and indeed her best and most characteristic verses do exhibit a strong affinity with many of the Metaphysical poems of that era. Like the works of Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw (if on a more modest scale), Adams's finest productions are dramatic, meditative, and meticulously crafted, display a considerable wit and a talent for irony, and reflect both careful thought and profound emotion; like those poets, indeed, Adams "feels her thought" (to borrow a famous phrase from Eliot's essay on the Metaphysical poets) and filters her feeling through a discriminating intellect. Hers is not, to be sure, a mind overly concerned with ideas per se, or with explicit argumentation; nor, for that matter, is she temperamentally inclined toward the deployment of numerous learned allusions or toward the obtrusive sort of wit and irony favored by some Metaphysical poets. On the contrary, Adams's intellect is manifested in the rigor and ingenuity of her poems; though the majority of them are not beyond comprehension, many are more than usually abstruse, and, like most of the poems of Donne and company, demand of a reader

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the concentrated exercise of his mental faculties.

It is, moreover, completely in keeping with the traditions of Metaphysical poetry that Adams's poems forge metaphorical connections—often rather obscure ones—between extremely dissimilar phenomena. In her poem "The Reminder," for instance—which appears in her last book, *Poems: A Selection* (1954)—Adams serves up what is essentially a metaphorical conceit, describing the sun throughout as an eye:

> All night there had sought in vain
> To coax a sullen eye,
> (And pressed to the black pane
> The brilliance of their sky)
> The winter moon blown high,
> And the starred and the clouded train.
>
> They have passed me glittering,
> And I heard tone on tone
> Of the cold nightchime ring,
> With will that churned alone
> And sight pinned bleak as stone
> To what the heart could bring.
>
> Till now the night wears thin,
> A roof leans out awry,
> And cocks and wheels begin;
> And from past morning-cry
> A lone, a steadfast eye
> Silently looks in.

Yet for all her similarities to the seventeenth-century poets, to pigeonhole Adams as a modern heir of Donne and Herbert would be a mistake. It is worth noting that she described herself as having been "influenced by Elizabethan, Early Romantic and, through Yeats largely, by Symbolist poetry." Adams's poems do, as a matter of fact, exhibit all of these influences—and others; a sensitive reader can hardly open a volume of Adams's work without beginning to catalogue the schools and movements, and the individual poets, that have played a part in shaping its language and sensibility. Adams's poetry is, for example, Elizabethan in its mood and its music; she makes frequent use of that favorite Elizabethan form, the sonnet, and, like the great Elizabethan sonneteers, brings gravity, even grandeur, to the subject of love (and to such time-honored ancillary themes as the rejected lover's sleeplessness) by means of an elevated style, an intensity of tone, and ingenious imagery. (To be sure, Adams is far less direct and effusive in her treatment of love, as a rule, than either the Elizabethans or the Metaphysical poets.) The influence of the early Romantics is equally prominent in Adams's work. The Self, for one thing, is as forcibly present in, say, "The Reminder" as it is in Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" or Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, in addition, Adams meditates upon nature in a way that goes beyond mere description of natural phenomena. But there is a significant distinction between her treatment of nature and theirs. If the early Romantics celebrate the transcendent qualities that they discover in ordinary things, Adams treats those same themes in a manner that is more overtly manipulative. She doesn't discover, in other words, so much as she invents; to her, as to the Metaphysical poets, poetry is not an organic phenomenon (as it is to the Romantics) but a made thing.

To say this is not to deny that nature, in Adams's poetry, assumes a spiritual—one might even say a religious—dimension. Indeed, it might be said that Adams shares the religiosity of a Crashaw, a Vaughan, or a Herbert, although she generally looks with reverence not upon the Christian God but upon nature and her art—glimpsing through both of them, one senses, some ineffable object of worship. Yet the accoutrements of Christianity are among the materials she makes use of in her poetry, as may be observed in the wonderfully firm yet delicate title poem of her first collection, *Those Not Elect* (1925):

> Never, being damned, see paradise.
> The heart will sweeten at its look;
> Nor hell was known, till paradise
> Our senses shook.

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Never hear angels at laughter,
For how comports with grief to know
Wisdom in heaven bends to laughter, laughter,
Laughter upon woe?

Never fall dreaming on celestials,
Lest, bound in a ruinous place,
You turn to wander with celestials
Down holy space.

Never taste that fruit with the soul
Whereof the body may not eat,
Lest flesh at length lay waste the soul
In its sick heat.

"Those Not Elect" is not Adams's only poem to touch upon such Christian concepts as heaven, the soul, and election. In "Kingdom of Heaven," an old man awakens to a sound that proves to have issued from the horn of the angel Gabriel, who has "come down to see who woke/On earth's cold brink when night was through." Such poems notwithstanding, however, Adams is less likely to speak of God, in any Christian sense, than of "the gods"; it is significant that when a poem of hers ("The Font in the Forest") contains the words "christening" and "font," the setting is not a church but a forest in which one may find

a font, tongueless, which lichens tinge
With chill frescoings, where of day
On day sad afterlight must fall
Changeless upon the falling of a day
Lichens in frond with their dim arms adore.

As that closing line might suggest, the sensibility of Adams's poetry often seems to derive largely from that of the Symbolists. The mysterious, dreamlike quality of her poems, their reliance upon suggestive imagery and indirect references, their freedom from sentimentality and didacticism, their sadness and beauty and sense of vision: these are the hallmarks of a Symbolist. Like many Symbolists, however, Adams crowds her poems with references to such depersonalized entities as the tormented heart, breast, and senses, while making few direct and extended references to actual human individuals (aside from the speaker) or to the world of social intercourse.

Note well: this sparsely populated world of Adams's poetry bears little resemblance to the inert, vacuous natural images perpetrated by many contemporary versifiers who, out of a desire to write "pure" poetry and a disinclination to risk sentimentality, cliché, or controversy (or, for that matter, to *think*), omit not only people but also thoughts and feelings from their work, and concentrate on objective descriptions of plants, seascapes, and the like. Adams's dynamic, richly emblematic poems, on the contrary, seem to reflect an implicit conviction that to stare long and hard into the face of nature is, in some sense, to bring all truths, whether cosmic or personal, into more nearly perfect focus, that to stare into that face is (so to speak) to find oneself looking straight into one's own heart. Such a poem as "Quiet" demonstrates that it is possible to combine this sort of intense introspection with strict poetic discipline:

Since I took quiet to my breast
My heart lies in me, heavier
Than stone sunk fast in sluggish sand,
That the sea's self may never stir,
When she sweeps hungrily to land,
Since I took quiet into my breast.

Strange quiet, when I made thee guest,
My heart had countless strings to fret
Under a least wing's fingering.
How could I know I would forget
To catch breath at a gull's curved wing,
Strange quiet, when I made thee guest?

Thou, quiet, hast no gift of rest.
The pain that at thy healing fled
More dear was to my heart than pride.
Now for its loss my heart is dead,
And I keep horrid watch beside.
Thou, quiet, hast no gift of rest.

One might note, by the way, that certain aspects of this poem—for example, its insistent repetitions (especially of the word

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heart), its archaic second-person pronouns, its effective use of the negative (i.e, in its last line) and of the first-person pronoun, its three-stanza form, and its stylized syntax—recall Yeats, a poet of whom traces can be found throughout Adams's work.

The Metaphysical poets, the Elizabethans, Romantics, and Symbolists: that a poet should have assimilated so many different influences, and with such success, is a vivid demonstration of the breadth of Léonie Adams's tastes and sympathies; patently, Adams was a woman to whom the minds of Raleigh and Rimbaud were equally accessible, the music of Crashaw and Coleridge equally sublime. But there are other influences. Louise Bogan—a longtime friend with whom Adams was often compared, to whom she partially dedicated *High Falcon,* and with whom she shared the 1955 Bollingen Prize—commented that Adams "has moments of cousinship with Webster and Tourneur, with Vaughan and Traherne," and that "her later poetry is so charged with meaning that it sometimes slips out of syntax, in the manner of the late Mallarmé." Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska—who, in their *History of American Poetry, 1900-1940* (1946), devoted to Adams a generous portion of the chapter on the 1920s—spoke of "her mingled debt to and careful, attentive readings in the poetry of de la Mare and Gerard Manley Hopkins." With John Crowe Ransom, moreover, a fellow modern student of the Metaphysical poets, Adams shares (among other things) a fondness for references to "blood," "heat," and "earth." Then there are Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson, both of whom one espies somewhere in the background of "The Barouche":

Squares south the play was done:
Thick the housetops rise,
Hemming them; all their way
Northerly lies.

Drenched in sleep the cabman,
Drowsy-heeled the mare;
And half in sleep and dreaming,
Travel the fare.

Mournfully, sweetly so,
Midnight to morning goes,
When air has its honey
Of the lilac and rose.

Town is a blackened pool
Hooded with sleep;
And hooves are like bells
With night so deep.

Down every alley corner
Are heavenly gaps laid bare;
They see the clouds driving,
The moon runs there.

Their moon of warmest dusks,
And wasting in late skies,
Who now with perishing
Last silver flies.

If he'd a penny given,
For the mare sweet hay,
And they'd but faith
To be merry that way!

Finally, one might quote Kenneth Rexroth, who wrote in a review of Adams's *Poems* that her work "is something like some early Pre-Raphaelite verse, but [that] it is most, in my opinion, like Muslim poetry."

There is some degree of validity to most of these parallels; it all depends on which aspect of Adams's work one is talking about. The remarkable thing, in any event, is not that Adams learned from so many teachers, but that she was able to borrow in a highly specific way from each of them, and to create thereby a kind of verse that was very much her own. By reason of this catholicity, one might justifiably argue that the critic who isolates one or two influences in his discussion. of Adams's poetry says more about himself than he does about Adams.

However much they differ on the question of Adams's influences, most of the critics who have chosen to write about her work have done so very respectfully. Yet there have been complaints. A familiar one is that Adams's poems, for all their virtues, are

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more impressive than they are affecting; indeed, some critics have suggested that they are *too* well made. Rexroth, for instance, said that her poetry's "tooling and refinement of texture is [sic] impeccable and elaborate at once, but for me, at least, it inhabits a remote emotional region that, with the best intentions in the world, I find it very difficult to discover, let alone reach." Her lack of variety has also been the cause of complaint; a *Saturday Review* critic remarked that in some poems "her evenness of tone verges, for me, upon monotony." Another critic, Padraic Colum, carped about the lack of "fulness" in *High Falcon,* though what really bothered him seems to have been her mostly downbeat view of things: "Too often, the poet gives us the trees stripped bare. We want her sometimes to give us the tree with its leaves and fruits and a bird singing in the leaves." That most of Adams's negative critics have in fact been put off more by her tone than by any actual literary deficiency would seem to be confirmed by Granville Hicks's comment that "it is something of a relief to turn [from Léonie Adams] to a poet who confronts life less tensely."

One cannot dismiss such criticisms out of hand; to read Adams *can* be difficult and draining. There is, moreover, a certain narrowness to her work. Eliot observed that the Metaphysical poets "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience"; for all her similarities to those poets, this could not quite be said of Adams. Also, some of her poems are less accomplished than others—their syntax a bit too convoluted, their antiquated diction overdone—and a few of her locutions are almost ugly. "To the Waterfront Pigeons," for instance, begins in truly awful fashion: "Cease to preen, O shining pigeons!" Such a line reminds one of what Randall Jarrell wrote in his essay on Whitman—that "a line like *O culpable! I acknowledge, I exposé!* is not anything that you and I could do—only a man with the most extraordinary feel for language, or none whatsoever, could have cooked up Whitman's worst messes." The same applies to Adams.

Do not mistake me, however: Adams's weak poems and bad lines are easily outnumbered by her more successful efforts. And if anything, her poetry grew stronger with the years, manifesting at the same time a progressively greater emphasis on image and a diminishing emphasis on (as she put it) "sound patterns." Yet the major change in Adams's poetry, as the Twenties gave way to the Thirties and Forties and so on, was simply that there was so much less of it. As appreciative as one is of the poetry that she did write, one cannot help but wonder: How did it happen that this richly gifted poet—who lived, after all, to be almost ninety—published only one collection of poems after the age of thirty? The closest that Adams ever came to answering this question publicly, so far as I know, was in a 1940 statement, published in the reference book *Contemporary American Authors.* "I sometimes feel," she wrote, "that poetry at present like other things is about to undergo the kind of variation that amounts to the leap to a new genius . . . . I have been silent a long time because I am now grappling with the limitations of the lyric." Fourteen years after that statement, to be sure, Adams published *Poems: A Selection,* containing several new lyrics that were at least as fine as anything she had ever written. Clearly, however, her grappling with those limitations continued, and perhaps even intensified: for—though she would teach and lecture, and win fellowships and awards, for a long time thereafter—*Poems* proved to be Adams's last book-length publication.

But the length of the silence that has followed the book's appearance should not be held against her; nor should the less than copious size of her output. It is, to be sure, a small body of work, but it contains an astonishing number of strikingly good poems. Young poets of the 1990s could do worse than to turn to Adams for aesthetic inspiration, for a lesson in craft and discipline, and for more than a few of the isolated moments of joy which are, after all, the only good reason to read poetry in the first place.

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Victoria Ocampo's "Sur"

by Mark Falcoff

The problem of culture in South American countries is eminently political, in the sense that writers and artists have no choice but to decide early on where they fit in the broader context of Western civilization. During the period of the conquest, the issue could hardly arise: a politico-military order, imposed from the top, created a sharp hierarchy of values, in which proximity to the culture of the rulers—in this case, either Spanish or Portuguese—defined one's own position in society. The coming of the Enlightenment to Latin America in the late eighteenth century upset such certainties. For the local elites, the Iberian model was successfully challenged by France, creating a permanent schism between the culture absorbed, as it were, at one's mother's knee, and what one now knew to be "culture" in the highest sense of the word. One of the principal frustrations of the Latin American intellectual then became—and has since remained—the lack of immediate correspondence between the cultural values imported from abroad and the raw materials—human and otherwise—immediately available at home.

Since the First World War, however, some have risen to question the value and relevance of Western culture to what are, after all, only imperfectly Western societies. This cultural nationalism holds that Western institutions and values are exotic imports which have nothing to do with what these societies are all about. In this view, the proper measure of a community's success or failure is not its proximity to a foreign model but the degree to which it achieves consonance with its authentic essence (*el ser nacional*).

In some ways this debate echoes the controversy between "Westernizers" and "Slavophiles" in late imperial Russia, but with three crucial differences. First, the range of cultural alternatives Latins have been free to explore has been much greater than it ever was for the Russians. Second, in certain places—Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and the southern provinces of Brazil—the prospects for replicating Western society have been much greater than any other conceivable synthesis. And third, intellectuals in Europe and the United States, unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, have tended to encourage a rejection of their own institutions, ostensibly to encourage the Latins in their search for "authenticity" but actually to service their own exoticism, utopianism, or self-hatred.

All of these issues and more are helpfully illuminated in a major new monograph, by the British scholar John King, on the Argentine literary review *Sur* (1931-1970) and its remarkable founder, Victoria Ocampo (1891-1979), who sustained *Sur* as a major force in Argentine and Hispanic letters for more than forty years.[1] Apart from making acces-

1 *Sur: A study of the Argentine literary journal and its role in the development of a culture, 1931-1970,* by John King; Cambridge University Press, 232 pages, £27.50.

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sible for the first time to the English-speaking reader an enormous amount of material on Argentine culture and politics, Mr. King also reveals some of the agendas which inspire Latin American studies in Western Europe, and very specifically in the United Kingdom. But more on that anon.

Monographs on extinct literary journals are usually interesting only to specialists—if to them. Typically, they establish the phylogeny of alliances, schisms, and regroupings of small cliques of writers whose importance is difficult to grasp today. What makes this study different is the fact that the journal upon which it is based was party to a major cultural and political controversy in Argentina. Most of the issues in Mr. King's book are, in fact, of continuing importance in the other Latin American republics, as well as a number of other countries of the Third World.

In the mid-1960s, when I was living in Argentina as a graduate student, it was simply impossible not to notice the way that the very name of Victoria Ocampo or her journal divided any social gathering into two warring camps. What somebody thought of Ocampo, *Sur,* and its group of writers anticipated a great deal of information about them, as well as about their views on Argentina and a wide range of other subjects.

In *Sur*'s final decade, Victoria Ocampo was something of an institution in Buenos Aires—particularly revered by those Argentines for whom the best period of national life had been before the first government of General Juan Perón (1946-55). These might be reactionary society ladies who remembered those years as ones in which "you could get a servant for a favor"; but they might just as easily be schoolteachers or other less exalted personalities whose nostalgia was not for a world they had lost but for a world that might have been—Argentina as a democratic nation, with a rich, tolerant, and diverse cultural life. Ocampo's enemies were likewise disparate: they included Peronists and populists of other descriptions, also Marxists of a certain stripe ("Trotsko-Peronists"). These people despised her for her supposed wealth, her aristocratic origins, her friendships, her flamboyant personal style, above all for her notion of literature as something apart from—and superior to—politics, especially Argentine politics.

She was always "the controversial Victoria Ocampo"—a remarkable sobriquet for a woman who saw herself as basically nonpolitical (and who in fact is taken to task by Mr. King for being just that). For the irreverent, particularly cabaret comedians, she was an easy target, a relic from prehistoric ages, when the light went out from Paris to tell the Argentines what time to get up in the morning. One personal recollection perhaps illustrates this point. In the mid-1960s, there was a Fulbright professor in Buenos Aires from one of the minor universities in the mid-Atlantic area. He was a pleasant academic hack—a type which in retrospect seems unobjectionable compared to the kind of people who probably dominate his university today. Although his Spanish was atrocious, Ocampo, discovering that he was an American professor of philosophy, insisted on capturing him for her salon.

This was a sort of *thé-dansant* which met at her home in San Isidro on Sunday afternoons, admission to which was not easily obtained. The building itself was an architectural folly of a type which was once quite common in Argentina—a full-scale copy of the Petit Trianon at Versailles. The creme of Buenos Aires literary society—or rather, of a certain section of it—was there, but the poor professor could not communicate very well with his fellow guests, for the ground rules called for everyone to speak French, a language which he had never learned to speak or understand. The learned professor, it thus turned out, had nothing to say.

The story—which was supposed to speak volumes about the superficiality of the circle surrounding Señora Ocampo—made the rounds of the small American academic community, mostly graduate students. None of *us* had been invited; our *Schadenfreude* was complete. Only in later years did it occur to me that the incident may never in fact have occurred.

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The history of *Sur* begins and ends with this woman, because it is impossible to imagine that remarkable literary enterprise without her. Born to one of the country's most distinguished (and wealthiest) families in 1891, she received the conventional education of a young woman of what was then the most rigid and pretentious aristocracy in Latin America. This included French and English governesses; trips to Europe at an early age; music; poetry; deportment; and preparation for an early marriage and motherhood. From the very beginning Victoria was precocious, and to some degree rebellious as well. In 1913, at the age of twenty-two, she married a man she did not love, apparently as a means of escaping the stifling atmosphere of her father's house. When her spouse proved equally oppressive, she left him and established a household of her own, to the horror of her elders and the envy of her contemporaries. She was the first woman of her class to drive her own car and smoke a cigarette in public.

In 1928 she went to Europe as a wealthy, footloose divorcée, living for most of the time in Paris, where she came into contact with the elite of French literature and art. A stunning beauty—she remained so well into middle age—she was also extremely generous with her resources, and therefore welcome in the most exclusive salons and studios of the French capital, as well as in literary cafés. It was here, too, that she got to know many of the Russian émigrés in Paris, particularly Stravinsky, whom she was later to bring to Argentina. In 1931, she returned to Argentina, determined to start a literary review of her own.

The two personalities who seem to have inspired her in this enterprise were the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset and the American writer Waldo Frank, both friends whom she met in Europe and who remained on *Sur*'s editorial board to the end of their lives. Ortega had already visited Argentina in 1916 on a lecture tour, and returned in 1929, where he was the subject of much attention, particularly from women. In those days Buenos Aires society was a huge consumer of European culture, from lecturers to opera singers, much the way New York is today. This was facilitated by its vast wealth—the peso was on par with the dollar, and Argentina was ranked fifth or sixth among the countries in the world—and also by the fortuitous reversal of the seasons: the North Atlantic summer is the height of the Argentine social and cultural season.

According to Mr. King, Ortega's influence on Victoria Ocampo and *Sur* was felt in two critical ways. He believed that intellectuals should remain apart from politics; and that one of the primary tasks of any intellectual was to establish links with his counterparts in other countries; "autarky," he held, "could only spell obscurantism." As a corollary, Ortega asserted that the gap between the elite and the masses of any society was unbridgeable, and that the intellectuals of all countries had far more to say to one another than to their own peoples. These views reflected Ortega's own disillusionment with Spanish politics, and to some extent with Spanish culture; but they were well received in Argentina—a new country populated by immigrants from Spain and Italy but ruled by an aristocracy of landowners whose claim to prominence was partly based on the cultural distance between themselves and the hoi polloi. On the other hand, *Sur* never explicitly subscribed to Ortega's views (or any other elitist doctrines); thus, it was perfectly possible for serious democrats to feel at home with *Sur*'s approach to high culture. For these people, there was nothing inherently wrong with the kinds of things which interested the *Sur* group; it was merely that Argentina's political and social system inhibited their diffusion to large numbers of ordinary people.

Waldo Frank, Ocampo's other guide in founding *Sur*, is not much read today, but he was perhaps the most overrated literary figure of his generation. Educated at Yale, a prolific poet, playwright, novelist, travel writer, and publicist, he was part of the "lost generation" which emigrated to Europe after World War I. In Spain he met

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the Mexican poet Alfonso Reyes, who encouraged him to visit Argentina, which he did for the first time in 1929-30. Frank attracted huge crowds and scored an important success for American culture, which was then regarded as somewhat *infra dig* by the Argentine elite.

Why Frank made such an impact on the Argentines is not immediately apparent; years later local wits observed that he was important there because people thought he was important in the United States, and vice versa. Literary historians mention two factors which account for his reception—his apparent willingness to approach Argentines in the spirit of "inter-American" equality rather than condescension; and his rejection of "machine civilization," inspired by a conviction that emotional and atavistic impulses are more important than technology. Both sides of Frank's character were highly reassuring to Latin American audiences everywhere he went; it was a kind of pandering that was still new to them, and, when combined with good looks and considerable personal charm, must have been irresistible. Whatever the foolishness of his views on "machine civilization," he certainly did open a front in *Sur* for American culture—understood in its Transcendentalist version. He also suggested the name of the magazine, which means "south" in Spanish.

In Argentina itself Ocampo gathered around her a coterie of talented young writers and poets—the most famous of which was subsequently to be Jorge Luis Borges, but which also included Eduardo Mallea, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, María Rosa Oliver, as well as two Latin American expatriates who settled for a term in Buenos Aires, the Mexican Alfonso Reyes and the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña.

The importance of a new journal to Argentine literary life at a time like 1931 cannot be exaggerated, for in those years it was virtually impossible for any writer to make a living from his pen except through journalism. There were no Argentine book publishing houses; poets had to subsidize the printing of their own books, which they also had to distribute themselves; "culture" was European culture, something that one acquired at the Hachette or Garnier bookshop, or that was performed by a touring French or Italian company at the Colón Opera House. In spite of their pretensions, and even their patterns of consumption, the Argentine upper and upper-middle classes were philistine to the core.

Into such a world *Sur* brought a sophisticated, cosmopolitan literary taste and an unabashed regard for high culture. Between 1931 and 1970 the magazine published three hundred and fifty issues, some of the special numbers dedicated to the literature of a particular country—Japan, Israel, Brazil, the United States. A typical issue featured cultural and philosophical essays, book and film reviews, and art criticism. *Sur* was particularly inclined toward translation, and many British, American, and French writers appeared there in Spanish for the first time, including William Faulkner (*The Wild Palms*, translated by Jorge Luis Borges), André Breton, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, and André Malraux. Over the years its roster of writers included François Mauriac, Jacques Maritain, Alberto Moravia, Bertolt Brecht, Roger Callois, Thomas Mann, Rafael Alberti, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Antonio Gramsci.

Sur's contribution was not merely substantive—it opened whole new horizons to two generations of Latin American writers—but philosophical. It had no particular point of view, but it proclaimed certain values which could not easily be taken for granted—the importance of art for its own sake, of the highest standards of artistic quality, of freedom of expression. As the distinguished Mexican poet and anthropologist Octavio Paz later wrote, "What the *NRF* [*Nouvelle Revue Française*] was to the Europeans *Sur* is for me: the world of letters conceived as complete—neither apart from, nor opposed to, other worlds—but also never subordinated to them."

Given the operative definitions of the day,

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it is perhaps inevitable that for many years *Sur* gave priority to European writers, and published Argentine and Latin American contributors in the back of the book. "The European ideal," Mr. King calls it, and with some justification. Nonetheless, he exaggerates the degree to which the journal neglected Latin America: by his own reckoning, *Sur* published Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriela Mistral. With the exception of Mistral, at the time most of them had yet to achieve widespread recognition, so that *Sur* can rightly claim to have played a role in nurturing the new Latin American novel which later acquired so prominent a place in the cultural life of the North Atlantic.

Victoria Ocampo's personal economic circumstances, like those of many Argentines, began to deteriorate in the 1950s; by the 1960s it was no longer easy to subsidize her literary review, even with occasional foundation grants and the introduction of advertising from American, British, French, and Argentine companies. By the end of the latter decade, *Sur* was appearing infrequently, and in 1971 Ocampo, advanced in years and increasingly frail, closed it down. It has no successor, and there are no potential candidates on the horizon. The reasons are not merely economic but definitional. Western Europe, and particularly Paris, has lost the viselike grip in which it once held Argentine culture, but after a decade of terrorism, counter-terror, repression, and war, it is still difficult for Argentines to say today what are those distinctively "national" qualities which should inform intellectual and artistic life.

Ocampo and *Sur* became controversial precisely because they became enmeshed—even without meaning to—in a conflict between the liberal, cosmopolitan culture they espoused and the authoritarian populism that eventually overtook Argentina's public life. To understand how this happened requires a brief detour through Argentine political history.

Between 1880 and 1914, Argentina was transformed—culturally and economically—by European capital and immigration; but its political life was never fully reshaped to fit the mold of Western democracy. A suffrage reform made possible the victory of the country's first popularly elected chief executive in 1916, but the experiment in electoral democracy was brief. In 1930 the armed forces overthrew the government and up through World War II the country was ruled by a succession of conservative businessmen and military officers. In 1943, another military coup brought to the fore a new kind of leadership, personified by the Labor Minister, Colonel (later General) Juan Perón. In 1946, Perón was elected in his own right and for the next nine years he ruled as a quasi-dictator. When he quarreled with the Catholic church, the military turned against him in September, 1955, and forced him into exile.

Argentine historians still cannot quite decide how to evaluate the Peronist period; their ambivalence is justified. Mr. King claims that "Peronism was arguably one of the few truly democratic regimes in Argentine history," but it would be truer to say that it was one of the few regimes in which most Argentines felt they were represented—not quite the same thing.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to underestimate the genuinely popular and reformist aspects of the period. Perón made the labor movement a major player in national politics. He closed the gap between the classes, particularly the working class and the white-collar class, and between the city of Buenos Aires and the rural provinces of the Interior. He opened up new opportunities to the sons of immigrants, many of whom became wealthy industrialists or successful professionals. He built roads, schools, and clinics in the neglected Interior. He broke down an unspoken "racial" code which separated the darker-skinned Argentines from descendants of European immigrants.

He also, however, showed minimal respect for freedom of the press and opinion; he persecuted independent trade unionists; he

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purged university faculties of non-Peronist professors; he exalted loyalty to his person (and that of his wife, Eva) above all other national qualities, and indeed insisted that Peronism was consubstantial with the Argentine nationality. He also mismanaged the economy to the point that by the end of his rule he was rationing some of the basic foodstuffs which Argentina had formerly produced in abundance.

After Perón's fall in 1955, his successors, military and civilian, could not agree on the nature of the new political order, save that it should somehow be both democratic and anti-Peronist, even if this meant excluding at least thirty-five percent of the electorate from full participation in politics. Some supporters of the "Liberating Revolution" hoped that in time Perón's followers would transfer their loyalties to other parties and forces; others simply hoped to suppress Peronism as long as necessary until it died a natural death. When this did not happen, they accepted military rule for an indefinite term as the least objectionable of all possible alternatives.

The birth and death of *Sur* thus brackets some extraordinarily dramatic moments in Argentine and Western cultural history. During the 1930s the fundamental controversy in Argentina (as in most of the countries of Western Europe) was the viability of liberal, democratic institutions, versus some form of right-wing authoritarian rule. In Argentina the debate was sharpened by the Spanish Civil War, which was passionately debated in the parliament and press, and also provoked fistfights in streetcars and brawls in outdoor cafés. The coming of World War II divided Argentines still further, between those who favored the Allied cause and those who did not—though partisans of the Axis often claimed only to favor "neutrality."

The sudden advent of Perón was seen both at home and abroad as an unexpected transfer to the Western hemisphere of the same fascist forces just defeated by the Allied armies in Europe. The notion was exaggerated and in many ways wrongheaded, but it was at least understandable; many of the same people, including many of the same intellectuals who supported the Axis in World War II, were now suddenly reborn as Peronists. These were also the same people who were put into university chairs from which socialists, liberals, even conservatives were ejected by the new Peronist university administrations. Conversely, everything which passed for secular and progressive in Argentina was opposed to Perón. And this remained so in spite of the fact that the new regime was also firmly opposed by those forces traditionally associated with social and economic privilege.

In effect, the Perón period altered the fault lines of Argentine culture, or perhaps merely made them more politically explicit. Whereas Argentina (even under the fraudulent conservative governments of the 1930s) had been—however imperfectly—secular, pluralist, cosmopolitan, and capitalist, in the Peronist period it was clerical, doctrinaire, nationalist, populist, and statist. It produced no "strong cultural alternative," Mr. King writes, but rather was "a ragbag of different ideological tendencies whose only common denominator was their rejection of liberalism."

People associated with *Sur* made a convenient target, since they were guilty on both cultural and political counts. Though never active politically, Ocampo was a close personal friend of Marcelo de Alvear (president, 1922-28), whose death in 1942 deprived Argentine liberalism of its only outstanding leader. Borges, Bioy Casares, Mallea—practically all of the *Sur* writers—were democratic centrists and cultural cosmopolites; they tended to vote for the Radical party. They often taught or wrote side by side with democratic socialists or even Communists, though not with Catholic nationalists.

During the Perón period the latter took their revenge. *Sur* was never censored, but persons associated with it were harassed or driven out of their jobs, particularly in the universities. Borges was deprived of his livelihood at the Buenos Aires Public Library

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(and peremptorily reassigned as "inspector of poultry in the public markets"); Ocampo was briefly jailed on unspecified charges, and incarcerated along with common criminals and prostitutes.

The terms of the Argentine political equation were reversed after Perón's fall. The successor regimes, military and civilian, were "liberal" only in the sense that they were opposed to Peronism. The dictator's followers were exiled, jailed, or proscribed, but the cause did not die, largely because the country's economic decline—which began in the early 1950s—continued and deepened over the next two decades. Between 1955 and 1958, Peronism was still the largest political force in the country, so that no other party could capture the presidency without making a pact with it. By 1970 it was obvious that unless Perón died first, he would easily win the first genuinely free election the military chose to convoke, which in fact proved to be the case three years later. Thus, the choices became excruciatingly limited for persons of genuine democratic conviction, as Ocampo and the *Sur* group unquestionably were. To favor full expression of political opinion meant, in effect, a return of the dictator and all of his works; to fail to do so rendered the value of Argentine liberal currency almost worthless.

Meanwhile, in the 1960s various sectors of the Left who had opposed Perón during his presidency began to rethink the meaning of his regime. Disappointed that the Argentine working class continued to be loyal to the exiled dictator rather than to embrace one of the available Marxist alternatives, some intellectuals concluded that Peronism must not have been a South American variant of fascism at all, but a premature version of Third World socialism. In the service of this dubious claim, much recent Argentine history had to be rewritten, condemning decent democrats for their tactical convergences with the hated "oligarchy." The retrospective litmus test of political decency in the 1940s became in the 1970s one's "anti-imperialism," proven by neutrality in the Second World War and then by "non-alignment" in the Cold War thereafter. Inevitably, *Sur* was bound to fail both tests.

To discuss these issues authoritatively requires a fairly nuanced understanding of some complex political and cultural issues. This John King has, along with a very firm grasp of Argentine history and the literary environment in which *Sur* writers operated. What he lacks is any apparent sympathy with liberal democracy, which in turn prevents him from being wholly fair to his subject. Those familiar with the British academic environment will recognize in his book some of its characteristic birthmarks: an extremely lengthy gestation period (work began on this study in 1973); a strong background in French studies; careful, well-wrought prose; a clear leftist bias; a leavening of obligatory anti-Americanism; and a romantic (and often inaccurate) perception of other Latin American countries, which he evidently knows far less well than Argentina. There is also, it must be said, a certain coyness to his argument. He attempts to defuse some of the criticisms to which his interpretation leaves him vulnerable by seeming to take them into account in advance; nonetheless, he persists in his point of view regardless of all the countervailing evidence.

Mr. King's brief against the *Sur* group is that its members eschewed Argentine nationalism, identification with Latin American culture, and political commitment. In an opening chapter he correctly identifies the great debate in Argentine cultural history—whether to be "European" or "American" (somewhat like the famous "Redskins" versus "Palefaces" argument in American literature). He also shows, again quite properly, that the position one took in this debate *could* (and often did) have political and economic referents. If one believes, for example, that the American environment (and the people who inhabit it) are essentially barbarous, as did Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (president, 1868-1874), then necessarily those who possess "culture" (defined as European culture) are the proper class to rule.

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This is certainly the way that the Argentine upper class justified its privileged position during Ocampo's formative years. Mr. King fails to point out, however, that the very same group advanced policies—particularly foreign immigration, free public education, and foreign investment—that ultimately produced a large middle class to challenge its hold on political power. Moreover, almost all of the leaders of the first two democratic governments in Argentina (1916-1928) were drawn from the very same elite; its most characteristic personality, President Marcelo T. de Alvear, had long served as ambassador in Paris and regarded himself as much at home there as in Buenos Aires. In addition, the Argentine "masses" (as King calls them) were themselves always divided in their cultural loyalties. Those who came from Italy and Spain—a quarter of the population in 1914, nearly a decisive majority in Buenos Aires, Rosario, Santa Fe, and other cities of the eastern littoral—continued to think of themselves as Europeans, and, if they could afford to, educated their children accordingly. Those who lived in the provinces of the Interior, particularly in the Andean states bordering on Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, were part of another world, light years behind (or at least, apart from) the bustling, sophisticated city-state of Buenos Aires.

Which was the "real" Argentina? Obviously, neither and both. To pretend as late as 1940 that the country was typically Latin American, at least in the same cultural sense as Peru, Colombia, or Venezuela, would at best be a half-truth; a new wave of Spanish and Italian immigration following World War II would undermine the claim still further. The most important *political* fact of those years, however, was a change not in the mix of cultural components but in urban demography. During the war hundreds of thousands of darker-skinned Argentines emigrated from the Interior provinces to work in new industries in and around the capital, and by 1946 constituted a huge, unorganized political force to which Perón successfully appealed.

While there were strongly Argentine historical antecedents to Perón, he was never completely "American"; rather, he drew sustenance from a different "Europe" from that of Victoria Ocampo: instead of London or Paris, it was Mussolini's Rome or Franco's Spain. His particular genius, in fact, was his capacity to integrate both "American" and (his particular choice of) "European" currents into a single "Argentine" identity. It was a game so complicated, requiring such a careful, delicate balance, that many years would pass before anyone else could even attempt it. The point is that Argentine nationalism—of the kind that Mr. King faults *Sur* for having rejected—was not without its own European origins: Perón's personalism and authoritarianism were as much Spanish as Latin American, and in the end he was no more or less Argentine than Jorge Luis Borges.

Mr. King makes much of the fact that some writers who specialized in local color (Horacio Quiroga, for example) were less welcome in the pages of *Sur* than those who considered their work part of a larger European cultural horizon. Even so, it is remarkable how many Latin American writers eventually *were* published in its pages. The same is true of leftists like Gramsci, Sartre, and Brecht. Mr. King acknowledges as much, but then abruptly withdraws the concession by offering his own version of Marcuse's doctrine of "repressive tolerance":

> Gramsci . . . had warned against the seemingly liberal, all-embracing nature of such anthologies [issues devoted to the literature of a foreign country]; his work shows that hegemony is not maintained by imposing a uniform ideology, but by the way in which different ideological viewpoints are absorbed by the dominant discourse . . . .
>
> In the case of Gramsci, as in the case of Sartre, the universal moral significance of his writing displaced his particular political significance. Such writers would have to escape the pages of *Sur* before their particular importance could be understood in Argentina.

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In other words, *Sur* could only have met Mr. King's criteria for ideological pluralism by publishing the most overtly political selections of writers of whom he approves—writers on the Left, needless to say—and only then by preceding and following their work by other writers of like mind.

Perhaps the greatest injustice King commits against *Sur* is to claim that it purposely avoided political commitment. Actually, it would be nearer to the truth to say that Ocampo and her colleagues believed that some things were more important than politics, and that a writer need not wear his politics on his sleeve. Among other things, this explains their preference for the more non-political pieces of European Marxist writers. In general, however, the *Sur* group was suspicious of people who subordinated art to ideology. Logically, then, the magazine was always hostile to both fascism and Communism. To say, however, that it was apolitical, or fled from confronting political responsibility when the situation required it, is simply untrue, unless King's own ideological preferences are to be the sole criterion for who is committed and who is not.

It is perhaps worth recalling some of the positions taken by *Sur* over the years. It supported the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, at a time when all "fashionable" Buenos Aires (including self-styled Argentine "nationalists") were pro-Franco. It openly sympathized with the Allied cause (thus, inevitably, the Soviet cause) during World War II. And it shared a common attitude with the United States and Western Europe in the Cold War, and later with democratic (as opposed to leftist revolutionary) forces in Latin America. This explains why, up to the Cuban revolution, the *Sur* group sensed no particular antagonism from the Argentine Left. Indeed, between 1931 and 1948 they were part of the same broader "liberal" political community; because of the overwhelming need to marshal a common front against Perón, the relationship survived precariously through the early years of the Cold War.

Mr. King mostly disapproves of *Sur*'s political preferences where they were expressed—even to the point of taking issue with its support for the British cause in World War II. He points out, somewhat archly, that the British government actually preferred that Argentina remain neutral, so that its merchant marine could safely deliver foodstuffs essential for the war effort. In the narrowest sense this may be true, but it fails to take into account the cultural environment in which *Sur*, the local British community, and the Argentine political class were operating at the time. In 1940 neutrality *as practiced* in Argentina was intended to be, and in fact was understood to be, an expression of pro-Axis sentiment, whatever the secret priorities of Whitehall. Forty years later, with Nazism a vague memory, it is easy to rewrite history from a *tier-mondiste* point of view. What Mr. King appears to be doing is reading his repugnance for Thatcher and the rebirth of British patriotism back into history; for him, as presumably for many British academics of the Left, there can never have been a time when their country was on the "right side" of history.

Mr. King is correct to single out the Cuban revolution as the watershed event that dramatically altered *Sur*'s position in Argentina's cultural life, and made it an object of controversy and ridicule. The way he puts it is this:

> *Sur* chose to turn its back on Cuba, and thus rejected much that was innovative in Latin American culture in the 1960s . . . .
>
> To take an anti-Cuban line in a Latin American literary magazine at the time was virtually to condemn that magazine to the wilderness . . . .
>
> Equally important, the anti-Cuba stance lost *Sur* the cooperation of many boom writers, the Cubans themselves, and a whole generation of Argentine intellectuals who were clearly identified with the Revolution . . . .
>
> *Sur* had always read Latin American texts selectively, and could interpret Cuba only at

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the most literal level: as a Communist, totalitarian regime.

For Mr. King, it would seem, it is more important to be in tune with the *Zeitgeist* than to adhere rigorously to one's own code of political decency. More remarkable still is the author's apparent presumption that as late as 1986 the jury was still out on the nature of the Cuban experiment. A more balanced appraisal would have emphasized the degree to which *Sur*, for all of its conventional "literary" tastes and its evident conservatism, was closer to understanding the nature of the situation on an island four thousand miles away—not to mention its threat to the freedom of its own writers and artists—than "many boom writers" and a whole host of Argentine intellectuals.[2]

We get a much clearer idea of Mr. King's objections to *Sur* when he finally reveals the kind of literary journal which he prefers—the Mexican quarterly *Cuadernos Americanos*. "It illustrated," he writes, "that an alternative attitude to that of *Sur* was possible and coherent, and its fortieth birthday has been recently celebrated with a large exhibition in Havana." To those who know both countries, the comparison would seem wholly out of hand: unlike Argentina, Mexico has a rich Indian heritage, and a strong Hispano-mestizo popular culture, which simplifies enormously problems of definition.[3] Still and all, one should not overrate the profundity or seriousness of *Cuadernos Americanos*: its *mejicanidad* is largely expressed through screeds against the United States, dime-store Marxism, and wholly unconvincing excursions into nativism. Mr. King seems not to know, by the way, that *Cuadernos Americanos* has long been subsidized by the Mexican government, as part of its ongoing campaign to domesticate its intellectual class and assure that national debate remains within certain restricted limits. Its "leftism" and "Americanism" are really nothing more than a fancy-dress swindle, as any Mexican intellectual—including any left-wing Mexican intellectual worth his salt—will tell you. A better example might be Octavio Paz's magazine *Vuelta*, but it too has "turned its back on the Cuban revolution," so perhaps its political commitment would fall short of Mr. King's requirements.

What kind of a literary review would have more nearly served the interests of Argentine national identity, cultural authenticity, and political commitment during the years 1931-70? Even Mr. King admits that "[*Sur*'s] detractors provided no lasting alternative strategy." To be sure, Perón's government subsidized cultural activities of a sort, and rewarded complaisant writers and artists. But even Peronist critics, Mr. King writes, "admit that in cultural terms the pro-Peronist writers produced very little of value and that they represented a small section of the intelligentsia." A few costume films here; a few tangos there; one or two second-rate novels; the "cultural" supplement of Eva Perón's daily *Democracia*—all failed to outlast their immediate context.

The Perón period did, however, terminate once and for all the conditions under which "establishment" culture had been possible in the first place. It bankrupted the country and particularly the minor rentier class—the very group upon which serious culture had depended. It politicized the universities and provoked the first of many waves of emigration of Argentine intellectuals to Western Europe, other Latin American countries, and the United States. What was particularly deplorable about all of this was the celerity with which the old culture was destroyed without the slightest notion of what was to be put in its place, save for xenophobia and anti-intellectualism disguised as cultural

2 As for "the Cubans," King passes over the fact that, with the exception of Edmundo Desnoes, not a single important writer identified with the early period of the revolution currently resides and writes in Cuba itself. Cultural bureaucrats disguised as writers—like Roberto Fernández Retamar—are quite another matter.

3 Even so, the Mexicans have not reached a consensus on the value of their Spanish heritage; in fact, it is the longest running controversy in that nation's history.

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nationalism. In that single sense Perón can rightly be said to have been the South American precursor of Third World socialism.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a vapid if harmless folkloricism was put into the service of a movement for "national and popular power"—that is to say, urban terrorism. (The guerrillas even called themselves *montoneros,* the name given to gaucho armies in the early nineteenth century.) In such an environment, *Sur* was necessarily irrelevant to the Argentine scene, not because of any deficiencies on its part, but because the best of European and international culture which it sought to bring to the country no longer evoked a local resonance. More was the pity, for the newer currents—both Left and Right—which dominated discourse in the 1970s left the country poorer, bloodied, greatly diminished. By the time Ocampo died in 1979, even the Cuban journal *Casa de las Américas* could not but refer to *Sur* as "the work of a woman who lived life on her own terms, and instead of expending her considerable resources on clothes, jewelry, and perfumes, directed part of them to make it possible for Argentina to have an up-to-date literary magazine." A grudging, modest tribute, whose very source confirms beyond all doubt its fundamental justice.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

On Martin Green's "New York, 1913" *by Hilton Kramer*
Peter Handke *by John Simon*
Robert Louis Stevenson *by Joseph Epstein*
Romain Rolland *by Renee Winegarten*
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The life and work of Jean Stafford *by Bruce Bawer*
The young Wittgenstein *by Roger Kimball*

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Poems *by Jeffrey Harrison, Bruce Bawer, Florence Grossman, Jane Kenyon & William Wilborn*

Approaching Alahan

(A ruined Byzantine monastery in Turkey)

They picked the harshest setting they could find,
this mountain of rock and dirt where nothing grows
but thistles and pines, and the only animals
are lizards darting from behind the rocks,
and cicadas—always heard but rarely seen.
They chose the right place for asceticism.

They also chose it for its closeness to
heaven. Look, we're as high as an airplane.
And the plain below—the world—is veiled by haze,
while we are in the clear blue rarefied air.
Rarefied, but still a hundred degrees.
Let's sit on this boulder and cool off.

If you didn't know already, you'd almost think
the chirring of cicadas which fills the air
came from the pine cones clustered in the trees—
so many, such fertility for such
an arid place, or maybe it's because
so few of them will seed successfully.

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Look! There, on a pine branch, a lizard—
eating a cicada. The sunlight glints
off the cicada's brittle wing, like a signal,
as the lizard jerks its head and swallows it.
Perhaps the monks would have interpreted this
as a little scene from hell. But possibly

the monks identified with the cicadas:
another chanting order. That otherworldly
swelling whir might have reminded them
to "pray without ceasing," and lifted them
a few inches off the ground, a few inches
closer to God, as they walked toward the church.

Centuries later, we walk toward the church,
and inside. Our attention instantly expands.
The late sun turns the rusty stones deep orange;
and through the roof and windows, the blue sky.
A lone, skeletal arch bridges the apse
just above where the altar would have been,

miraculously intact, a leap of faith.
Or almost. As close as we may ever come.

—Jeffrey Harrison

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Prayer rug

The rug itself is a kind of prayer.
Certainly the making of it was one,
the weaver kneeling down before it
to perform an act of laborious devotion:
the slow revelation of a holy pattern.
The finished rug becomes wholly itself
when it is pointing toward Mecca
and someone kneels on it and prays.

But even on the wall of a museum
it is not fully separated from prayer.
People file by quietly, with reverence,
and a few stop and stare as if to burn
the pattern of the rug into their minds—
until the rug becomes a dazzling portal
inviting the viewer to walk through
to a space beyond where the sky is green.

—Jeffrey Harrison

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Grand Central Station, 20 December 1987

in memoriam M. J. G.

The clock's so huge you can watch the minute hand
crawl steadily toward three. It's after one
on a gray and drizzly Sunday afternoon
before Christmas, and all around me stand

handsome young men who look like paradigms
of American youth. Poised, affluent, and clean-
cut in sweaters that read *Princeton* and *Penn,*
they chat idly, glancing from time to time

at their luggage, and at the clock; they're on
their way to Westport, Mahopac, and Rye,
to houses set beneath a still blue sky,
each with its Porsche, its wide and quiet lawn,

its complement of trees—elm, maple, birch—
and to an exurban sense of harmony
synonymous, for them, with home. And me?
I'm going to a Hastings-on-Hudson church

to say farewell to one who should have been,
eighteen years hence, a freshman Ivy Leaguer
heading home for Christmas—bright, slim, eager
to see his parents, waiting for a train.

—Bruce Bawer

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Harvestmen

October, you see them propped on porches,
straw, the size and shape

of somebody's cast off
flannel shirt and hole-in-the knees jeans.
One arm cradles a pitchfork. Sometimes

it's a couple, side by side in wicker rockers,
she stuffed into a long faded dress,
a flowered hat, a live cat dozing

in her lap, or a whole family
in effigy, their pumpkin heads smiling
at the leaves going down in glory,

our old selves, after the reaping,
what we make of them,

who, otherwise, might have been
as straws in the wind.

—Florence Grossman

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Father and son

August. My neighbor started cutting wood
on cool Sabbath afternoons, the blue
plume of the saw's exhaust wavering over
his head. At first I didn't mind the noise
but it came to seem like a species of pain.

From time to time he let the saw idle,
stepping back from the logs and aromatic
dust, while his son kicked the billets
down the sloping drive toward the shed.
In the lull they sometimes talked.

His back ached unrelentingly, he assumed
from all the stooping. Sundays that fall
they bent over the pile of beech and maple,
intent on getting wood for winter, the last,
as it happened, of their life together.

—Jane Kenyon

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The pear

There is a moment in middle age
when you grow bored, angered
by your middling mind,
afraid.

That day the sun
burns hot and bright,
making you more desolate.

It happens subtly, as when a pear
spoils from the inside out,
and you may not be aware
until things have gone too far.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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The gift

At Christmas in an empty house at night,
Too much dry winter air for him to sleep
For whom the furnace has become a friend
Downstairs with reassuring work to do,
He rises, coughing, to admit a crack
Of cold against this overhuman time,
Skirting by old memory the tree
That would have stood there by the window frame,
And finding, snow glazed over and the moon
Abroad, a light so hard across the fields,
So colorless, so bare of human means
To any end his heart could still conceive,
Throws up the sash, leans out and swallows deep
The fine cold tonic emptiness of things.

—*William Wilborn*

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Music

The Muse under Mussolini

by Samuel Lipman

Whatever may be said about the lack of centrality of serious music in twentieth-century culture, there can be no doubt that it has engaged the attention of the dictators for whom our epoch is so infamous. Though none of us can be sure of the precise connection between art and life, for totalitarian regimes that connection has been always absolute, and often bloody.

Nearest to us in this dismal record of the manipulation of art for the aggrandizement of illicit power is the China of Mao Tse-Tung, especially the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Mao's campaign against the arts was crafty in the extreme, for it was based on the suppression of the same artists who only slightly earlier, under the rubric of "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom," had followed the demands of their own aesthetic goals. While most Western attention was concentrated on the torture of writers, music, too, was given the benefit of Mao's loving thought. Western intellectuals, quick to defend literature, seemed hardly to react when performers of European music had their hands broken, or when the classic Peking opera was re-directed by force to embody the dictates of Maoist social doctrine. Indeed, many of our own avant-gardists showed a thoroughgoing concern for the new at the expense of the old; the English composer Cornelius Cardew, for example, proclaimed himself on the side of Mao Tse-Tung's thought, and to our own John Cage, zany as ever, it seemed as if the (to him) admirable old fellow might well be responsible for "the bringing together of the family."

A bit further back in time there was the chilling fate of the USSR under Stalin, and before him, Lenin. These two monsters and the system they created subjected the Russian musical tradition of Glinka, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Tchaikowsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Rachmaninov to the demands of proletarian agitprop and socialist realism. Prokofiev and Shostakovich, the first having come to maturity before 1917 and the second trained by products of the *ancien régime,* were alternately treated as Communist stars and as petit-bourgeois villains. Fortunately, Shostakovich's tragic story—thanks to the work of Solomon Volkov—is well known in the West; that of Prokofiev, who had the misfortune not to outlive his tormentor Stalin, is still curiously muffled. The emigration of Soviet performers from their once-promised land has produced at least three major accounts of life under tyranny. In Valery Panov's *To Dance* (1978), Jasper Parrott's *Ashkenazy: Beyond Frontiers* (1984), and Galina Vishnevskaya's *Galina* (1984) we learn in sordid detail what it was like for a dancer, a pianist, and a singer to experience the terror of Bolshevik artistic success.

When we go still further back to musical life in Adolf Hitler's Germany and Austria, we encounter a paradoxical situation. For Jews, and for those non-Jewish musicians too closely associated with the despised twelve-tone compositional techniques of the

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proudly Jewish Arnold Schoenberg, life was a living (and usually a dying) hell, in which even total capitulation was unavailing. But for most non-Jewish musicians, normal musical life went on under Hitler and even flourished. Scarce resources were always made available, and gifted performers, even when concert halls and opera houses were nightly being destroyed, were favored beings, uninterfered with as long as they continued to entertain their audiences. Some of these remarkable artists—one thinks immediately of Wilhelm Furtwängler, Herbert von Karajan, and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf—went on to become constitutive influences on postwar musical life. While major controversy has often swirled around these artists and their colleagues, there can be no doubt that, in the absence of any evidence of specific criminal acts, their art has been allowed to triumph over their political pasts.[1]

There is another twentieth-century regime which in this respect deserves our consideration. Mussolini's Italian fascism, more than a decade before Hitler's conquest of power in Germany, was deeply concerned with art in general and music in particular. Now, with Harvey Sachs's *Music in Fascist Italy,* the first serious treatment in English of music under Mussolini has appeared.[2] The story Mr. Sachs tells is both deeply interesting and highly inconclusive. In any case, Mr. Sachs has put us in his debt for giving us such a thorough account of music and politics in fascist Italy and for relating this sorry spectacle to the wider panorama of Italian music from the turn of the century to the end of World War II.

There is a note of bygone glories present from the very outset of Mr. Sachs's book. He begins with the death of Giuseppe Verdi in 1901, an event which marked the end of a career that had taken the art of opera from his early masterpieces to the artistic heights of *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). For a half century, Verdi had carried not just Italian opera but Italian music as a whole on his broad shoulders. Despite the one-opera successes of Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano, and Cilèa, only one true successor to Verdi was to emerge: Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924). While one would hesitate to place the less musically and dramatically profound Puccini on the same level as Verdi, the fact remains that in the operas from *Manon Lescaut* (1893) through *Turandot* (completed in 1926, after Puccini's death, by Alfano)—and very much including *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), and *Madame Butterfly* (1904)—he created a body of highly popular repertory works, and that in so doing he was the last composer, of whatever national origin, to accomplish the feat.

But whereas Verdi had in all ways been an innovator, Puccini was an autumnal figure, content to provide beautiful Italianate melodies, richly harmonized and orchestrated with touches of French impressionism, all in the service of theatrically effective, well-made, and heart-wrenching plots. With Puccini's death, Italian musical leadership—at least as measured in critical esteem—passed from the composers of opera to those of instrumental music. New operas continued to be written, but the old level of mass success was nowhere to be found.

Even more disastrous for opera as a living art form was the sad fact that much of opera's traditional audience went over to film. At the same time, the new instrumental music hardly proved able to take up opera's slack. Of all the composers writing symphonic works and chamber music, only Respighi managed to find a secure place in the repertory, at home or abroad. And even his three popular and gaudy symphonic poems, *Fountains of Rome* (1917), *Pines of Rome* (1924), and *Roman Festivals* (1929), have won little respect from critics or other composers. The only other important Italian instrumental composer of the period, the

1 By contrast with the reasonably full documentation of Maoist and Soviet policies and their effects, to the best of my knowledge no first-rate account by a major participant in wartime German musical life has yet appeared, at least in English translation.

2 *Music in Fascist Italy,* by Harvey Sachs; Norton, 271 pages, $24.95.

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modernist Alfredo Casella (1883-1947), now seems quite forgotten, even in his homeland.

This dismal picture of Italian music must not be allowed to obscure one simple fact: the Italian people have for centuries been, and remain to this day, one of the most musical peoples in the Western world. Such composers as Palestrina and Monteverdi, Vivaldi and Domenico Scarlatti, Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini—and Verdi and Puccini, have shaped our very conception of melody and form. Italian singers have for centuries given us our idea of the musical use of the human voice. The families Guarneri and Stradivari have defined for us what string instruments should sound like. In our own time one Italian conductor in particular, Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957), has determined for us how Italian as well as German music should be performed. And we must not forget, either, the contribution of Italian émigré instrumentalists in forming American symphony orchestras at the turn of this century, and for many years thereafter.

It was this paradoxical situation of glory and desuetude that Benito Mussolini inherited just after World War I. As a political figure he was part magician, part mountebank, part fool, and part monster. Entering politics as a socialist of the Left, he soon developed a winning socialism of the Right, and made his own person the symbol of the revival of Italian national greatness. Even worse for music, he was a reasonably competent violinist, a sometime music critic, and, in general, a music lover.

What made Mussolini and his fascism so suicidally attractive to so many Italians also endeared him to musicians. Undoubtedly his first and greatest appeal was the promise of order. World War I had been a disaster for Italy in the loss of lives and treasure; the political and economic struggle which followed the war seemed to push the nation to the brink of anarchy. For Puccini in 1924 (as quoted by Mr. Sachs from an account of the composer's conversation), the political choice was clear:

> I don't believe in Democracy because I don't believe in the possibility of educating the masses. It is like trying to hold water in a wicker basket! Without a strong government headed by a man with an iron fist, like Bismarck in Germany in the past and like Mussolini in Italy now, there is always the danger that the people, who construe freedom as mere license, will become undisciplined and wreck everything. That's why I'm a fascist: because I hope that fascism will achieve in Italy, for the good of the country, the pre-war German national model.

Such feelings were hardly confined to the pro-German Puccini. Even Toscanini, Italian patriot to the core, supported Mussolini as a means of dealing with the weaknesses of Italy's political structure: as Mr. Sachs points out, Toscanini at first admired Mussolini's "Bolshevik-like platform" enough to stand for Parliament as a (losing) candidate on the Mussolini ticket.

Closely bound up with order as a selling point of fascism was nationalism. The territorial settlements following World War I had not brought Italy the rewards that its participation in the fighting had promised: the decline of Italian power seemed to suggest a parallel decline in Italian culture. Mussolini promised a transformation of the Italian image from that of the easygoing, folk-song-loving Neapolitan layabout to that of Imperial Rome. Though in actuality the solid musical achievements of this new dispensation were to be largely confined to the Roman symphonic poems of Respighi, fascism seemed to promise a renewal of professional and general music education, a better life for performers, the revival of Italian composers of the past, and the making of a new national atmosphere in which great music could once again be written.

Finally, fascism appeared to provide a new idea of what ***kind*** of music should be composed. By the early 1920s, the crisis of modern music had already become manifest, and nowhere was it more apparent than among conventionally trained musicians. Opera, it was clear, had come to an end as a

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constantly evolving and popular art form. It was equally plain that younger Italian composers, as their colleagues everywhere, were turning away from nineteenth-century romanticism to a modernism variously associated with the atonalism of Schoenberg, the neo-classicism of Stravinsky, and the various brands of futurism, including those connected with the Italian writer Fillippo Marinetti (1876-1944). Whatever the exact nature of the new music, it was obvious to all that it would not possess the melodic and harmonic power and charm that had made Italian music so successful.

Perhaps the most succinct statement of the romantic reaction against modernism was contained in a 1932 "Manifesto of Italian Musicians for the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century Romantic Art," signed by leading Italian musicians including Respighi and Riccardo Zandonai (1883-1944), the composer of the then fairly popular opera *Francesca da Rimini* (1914). Mr. Sachs's selection from this document expresses the feelings many musicians have harbored but few, in Italy or elsewhere, have been willing to state publicly:

> Our world has been hit, so to speak, by all the squalls of the most reckless "futuristic" concepts. As it grew more furious, the password truly aimed at the destruction of every old and ancient artistic ideal . . . . What have we gained from this? Atonal and polytonal honking. And what has been achieved by objectivism and expressionism? What's left of them? . . . A sense of facile rebellion against the centuries-old fundamental laws of art has infiltrated the spirit of young musicians . . . . The future of Italian music seems safe [according to the modernists] only at the tail-end of all the different types of foreign music . . . . There are [also] those who wish to re-chew the cud of our distant musical past. Above all, however, the last century's romanticism is being opposed and combatted . . . .

The manifesto then goes on to speak of the specifically Italian context:

> We Italians of today . . . in the midst of a revolution that is revealing, once again, the immortality of Italian genius . . . feel the beauty of the times in which we live and wish to sing of them, in their tragic moments as well as in their ardent days of glory. Yesterday's romanticism . . . will also be tomorrow's romanticism . . . .

The problem, of course, was to put all these inchoate desires into practice. Here all the hopes were dashed. Instead of art and artists in power, there were bureaucracies and administrators arranging the thousand petty jealousies, intrigues, and incompetencies characteristic of musical life. And so under Mussolini, as Mr. Sachs confirms, nothing in music really changed, though everything became even more shabby and seedy than it had been before.

In music education, studies were written, and committees met, but musicians continued to be ill-trained and Italian children were taught ever less of their country's glories. Badly needed new concert halls were not built, and some existing ones—as in the case of the acoustically excellent Augusteum in Rome—were even torn down. Beautiful and successful new music, despite numerous contests and prizes, was not written. On the positive side, performers, many of them first-rate, continued to appear, and the old operatic masterpieces continued to be put on and venerated.

At first, the worst that happened under Mussolini was that the personal politics so common in operatic and musical life were allowed to play on a national stage. Usually this meant no more than favoritism shown to party hacks, and a largely pro forma submission of policy matters to Rome, in many cases to Mussolini himself. But the potential for violence was always present, and in at least one case turned into a major embarrassment for Mussolini and a major turning point in the image abroad of Italian fascism. Mr. Sachs devotes much space to describing the regime's attempt, in 1931, to force Toscanini to begin a concert in Bologna with the fascist anthem "La Giovinezza." When it

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became known that Toscanini would refuse, he was roughed up just before the concert by a fascist tough. The world outcry was tremendous, and Toscanini did not conduct again in Italy until after World War II; even before his self-imposed exile in the United States, this fiery Italian patriot became the most admired symbol of anti-fascist Italy.

On a less glamorous level, however, Italian music went on, and the fascists did little to discourage new developments in contemporary music. The early 1930s, for example, saw the founding of two important music festivals, the *Festival internazionale di musica* in Venice (from 1930) and the *Maggio musicale* in Florence (from 1933). Both these festivals programmed much difficult new music, including works of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Berg: the last two composers were thus welcome in Italy at a time when they and their music were proscribed in Germany. Similarly, Jewish performers, including Bruno Walter, Fritz Kreisler, and Otto Klemperer, were welcome in Italy well after they had become outcasts under the Nazis.[3]

The fascist regime remained surprisingly hospitable to musical modernism even after the war started. Amazingly enough, Berg's *Wozzeck,* a prime example of what Hitler called *entartete Kunst* (degenerate art), was performed in Italy in 1942. Even the dodecaphonist Luigi Dallapiccola (1904-1975) was lightly treated. For Jewish artists, of course, everything changed after the strengthening of the alliance between Mussolini and Hitler after 1938. Thenceforth, Jewish composers and performers were excluded from Italian music, though physical repression was not employed against them until the German takeover of much of Italy in 1943.

More than four decades have now passed since democratic government has returned to Italy. It is perhaps the most surprising message of Mr. Sachs's book—but a message which rings true—that the trends in musical life already so visible in the early 1920s have changed little under freedom from what they were under tyranny. Grand opera has become even grander, and even less of a truly popular and organically growing form. And though Mr. Sachs does not stress this point, it is clear from his analysis that the musical avant-garde—associated with such traditionally modernist figures as Dallapiccola and Luigi Nono (born 1924, and the husband of Schoenberg's daughter Nuria), and the more experimentally inclined Bruno Maderna (1920-1973) and Luciano Berio (born 1925)—has carried what passes for new music in Italy even farther away from romanticism and any possible public sympathy. And over everything—whether in opera, concert life, or music education—hangs the suffocating fog of bureaucracy, made dense with the political arrangements and accommodations that seem to form an inevitable part of massive government support. The Italians are still a musical people, and they still love music, but with every passing day the vital and particular characteristics of Italian musical culture —even in the field of opera, which they invented—grow less.[4]

3 It is a pity that Mr. Sachs did not check more closely his attribution of Jewish status to certain important artists. Thus he mistakenly calls the nineteenth-century German and Protestant composer Max Bruch a Jew, as he does the German, half-Catholic, half-Protestant Bertolt Brecht, dramatist and collaborator of the Jewish Kurt Weill. Moreover, it is surely misleading to speak, as Mr. Sachs does, of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Strauss's great collaborator in *Elektra, Der Rosenkavalier, Ariadne auf Naxos, Die Frau ohne Schatten, Die aegyptische Helena,* and *Arabella,* as the composer's "Jewish librettist"; Hofmannsthal was but one-quarter Jewish, and the Strauss-Hofmannsthal works were performed in Germany throughout the Nazi era.

4 In this regard, last season's overpraised *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan Opera was instructive. The most noteworthy aspect of the production was not the conducting of Carlos Kleiber, as refreshing (if unidiomatic) as it was, but the singing: it was amazing to see how little Italianate charm two reigning Italian stars, Luciano Pavarotti and Mirella Freni, had to contribute to this, for them, national classic.

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For this unhappy outcome, one would very much like to blame Benito Mussolini, his lackeys, and the Italian musicians who, in order to survive and in some cases get ahead, slavishly collaborated. But while the historical record does indeed show that the fascists were swine and that many artists behaved badly, it does not prove that fascism did very much more than administer, in a confused and inefficient way, a decline that had set in somewhere around the turn of the century, and that has continued to this day.

Before we blame the Italians for this musical decline, we must recognize the sad fact that serious music, viewed as a living art, has not done well in our time. At the turn of the century contemporary music meant the symphonies of Brahms and Tchaikowsky, the late operas of Verdi and the first of Puccini, the early works of Debussy and Ravel, the tone poems of Strauss, the *Enigma Variations* and the *Dream of Gerontius* of Elgar. All those marvelous pieces—and many more—have shown an astonishing life and permanence. Now we live in an age of which the last forty and more years have seen almost no accretions to the accepted repertory. The greatest European music festivals, as always the models for America as well as for Europe, stress celebrity performers doing celebrity works in pleasing ways; indeed, it all reeks of the title of a German opera-tune LP of a few years ago: *Weltstars singen Welthits*. Whether the country under discussion is Germany or Austria, Italy or France, the Soviet Union or Japan, England or the United States, music has become an international task, and one which belongs increasingly to show business.

For those who love music, it is troubling that what they cherish has come to this pass. It is perhaps even more troubling that the problems so blatant in musical life may well be only a particularly obvious manifestation of a much wider contemporary shortfall in the creation of high culture. The fears expressed about the present and the future of music are, on this analysis, similar to the worries many involved in the other arts feel as they survey their own fields and compare what they see to the past.

To talk of these fears and worries is not to say that nothing of artistic worth has been created in our epoch. There have been marvelous things done in this century in painting, architecture, dance, poetry, fiction, and music too; but what once seemed to be a flood has for long been a trickle, and that trickle now seems to be a drought. To talk, as so many do today, of "postmodernism," of the triumph of stylistic pluralism and diversity, or of the happy destruction of boundaries between popular and high art, is only to commit the error Matthew Arnold so tellingly identified (in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*) as having "the grand name without the grand thing."

It is certainly plausible to assign responsibility for what has gone wrong to the undoubted depredations of totalitarian regimes and ideologies. But even so, there can be little doubt that democratic governments and philosophies, no matter how much they are worth fighting and dying for, have done little better in the creation of art. We do not know why this should be so, and, needless to say, our commitment to liberty must not be dependent upon liberty's use-value for art. Perhaps democracies, as a historical phenomenon, are still far too young to create the greatest artistic civilizations; perhaps the creation of such an austere and not immediately gratifying culture is a demand we have yet to make of our free societies and of ourselves.

It is a measure of the importance of Harvey Sachs's study of music under Mussolini that his story destroys our easy notion that by itself democracy provides the royal road to art and civilization. As a result of *Music in Fascist Italy,* we are further than ever before from thinking that a simple solution to the problems of culture and its creation can be found in political systems, operating by and in themselves.

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Art

Georges Braque at the Guggenheim

by Karen Wilkin

I owe Georges Braque a lot. When I was a child, a reproduction of a Braque hung opposite my place at the dining-room table. (It was the marvelous 1927 *Still Life with Clarinet* in the Phillips Collection, although I didn't know that then.) I remember dawdling over meals and staring at the picture. I liked the chalky blues and murky greens and the velvety blacks; I liked the way the grey-white squares with black discs sometimes looked like the mouths of wine glasses and sometimes like playing cards, but most of all I liked the amazing, green-outlined shape that I finally decided was two pears. Art appreciation had not yet invaded New York's elementary schools, so no one had told me about repeated shapes and compositional logic, but I could see all that. Even though nothing in the picture looked much like anything out there in the real world, it all made perfect sense, and that's what really fascinated me.

Still Life with Clarinet wasn't in the recent Braque retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum[1] (several of its close relatives were), but the qualities the painting has exemplified for me since I was eight—lucidity, logic, invention, unexpectedness—were visible in almost every work in the show. Braque is so obviously one of the twentieth century's great painters that it seems absurd that we have waited since 1949 for a comprehensive exhibition of his work in this country. But perhaps the delay isn't surprising. While Braque's reputation has never been in doubt, art history courses and museum installations have always stressed his close connection with Picasso during the formative years of Cubism, assuring Braque's place in the standard texts but, ironically, making him seem less important in his own right. Braque never laid claim to the popular imagination. He was the quintessential unflashy artists' artist who, by media standards, lived a life of exemplary dullness: no struggle for recognition, no severed ear, no succession of mistresses, not even agonized letters or revealing journals. Braque was a full-time painter by the time he was twenty-two. Four years later, he had his first one-man show, to the acclaim of his peers and colleagues, at Kahnweiler's Paris gallery. Married at thirty, he stayed married to the same woman for the rest of his life. (He died in 1963.) His introspective writings have been described as "Oriental-style meditations," illustrated reflections on art. Braque was very badly wounded during World War I, but that's it for drama, unless you count his inventing Cubism with Picasso or being the first living artist ever accorded a one-

1 "Georges Braque" was on view through September 11 at the Guggenheim Museum. The exhibition was organized in conjunction with Munich's Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung and was selected by Jean Leymarie. The catalogue, with essays by Jean Leymarie, Carla Schulz-Hoffmann, and Magdalena M. Moeller, is published by Prestel (278 pages, $30).

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man exhibition at the Louvre. There is no "Braque story," just single-minded dedication to making thoughtful, first-rate art. Sheer excellence—it's not what makes the cover of *Art News* or *The New York Times Magazine* these days, and it's not the stuff of blockbusters.

The Guggenheim's exhibition, organized in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Braque's death, deserved to be a blockbuster, and wasn't—quite. Despite some conspicuous gaps and some startlingly bad pictures, it was exciting and rewarding, but at the same time that you rejoiced at seeing so much of Braque's work you longed for a larger, even more comprehensive exhibition, one that would, for example, bring together all the *Billiard Tables* of the 1940s or all the radical garden chair and terrace pictures of the last years. The selection, made by the Braque authority Jean Leymarie, covered the territory adequately, but, as a colleague of mine pointed out, it was a very *French* selection: didactic rather than visual. The exhibition ranged from mature masterpieces to tentative late works, from superb Cubist collages to awful figure paintings, with detours for flabby drawings and sculpture better left undiscussed. It was Braque warts and all. At times, Leymarie's choices seemed dictated by a desire to exclude any pictures that were in the Centre Georges Pompidou's retrospective, organized in 1982 to commemorate the centennial of Braque's birth, although the more or less simultaneous assembly, this year, of at least two other Braque exhibitions probably explains many of the more noticeable omissions and apparently willful inclusions at the Guggenheim. Given the pleasure of seeing a reasonably large group of works spanning Braque's entire career, though, it seems churlish to complain.

Braque became "Braque" quickly. When he moved to Paris at eighteen, in 1900, to further his apprenticeship in the family house-painting and decorating business, he had only a few years of evening art classes behind him (and the example of his amateur painter father), and he continued to take art lessons. Few of Braque's earliest, essentially student works survive, but the exhibition included *The Artist's Grandmother,* 1900-02. At first sight, it is a conventional, academicizing picture, distinguished chiefly by its robust surface—quite possibly the result of the novice's loading of pigment in an effort to keep color clean—yet head and hands loom up out of darkness in the same way that objects in the mature Braque's still lifes loom up twenty years later.

By the end of 1905, Braque's friends Othon Friesz and Raoul Dufy had introduced him to what Matisse and Derain were doing with brilliant, expressive color, and a few months later Braque painted the first of his own Fauvist pictures. This initial declaration for modernism was treated rather summarily at the Guggenheim, perhaps because Braque was a follower rather than an inventor of Fauvism. Yet it would have helped to see more of the paintings of 1906-07 in order to pin down their peculiarities. In the best, such as the 1906 *Landscape Near Antwerp,* in the Guggenheim's Tannhauser Collection, color both creates tension across the surface and makes the painting breathe: sugary pink, pistachio green, and pale sulphur yellow separate themselves from slightly more saturated versions of similar hues, in the foreground, to imply distant shimmering water and moist air. Yet it is the overall orchestration of chalky, close-valued colors that makes the painting come alive, not the vague suggestion of space. The jammed canvases Braque painted at about the same time in the south of France seem airless by comparison, because of their oppressive, superheated color. A small seated nude, seen from the back, and a well-known still life of rounded jugs made it clear that Braque, at this stage, was better at landscapes and port scenes. Without the justification for color changes provided by the visual incidents of, say, a busy harbor, his Fauvist palette can seem arbitrary and his color patches fail to coalesce.

Perhaps he was aware of this. Whatever the reason, Braque seems to have lost faith

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Howard Hodgkin

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in Fauvism toward the end of 1907 and to have become open to new suggestions. He was deeply impressed by the exhibitions honoring Cézanne, who had died the previous year, at the Salon d'Automne and Galerie Bernheim Jeune, and when Guillaume Apollinaire took him to Picasso's Bateau-Lavoir studio he was reportedly "surprised" by what he saw. The rigor and density of Cézanne's pictures, along with the burgeoning rawness and geometry of Picasso's work of the time, led Braque to simplify his palette drastically and to concentrate on structure in ways new to him and, as it turned out, new to painting in general. By 1908, he and Picasso were working closely together—Braque once described them as "roped together like mountain climbers"—inventing a new language of fluctuating spaces, fragmented shapes, and geometric planes that its first viewers dubbed, half jokingly, "Cubism."

The association with Picasso lasted only a few years, but Braque spoke the language of Cubism for the rest of his life. The transparencies and complexities of the initial Analytic phase soon gave way to the pared-down shapes and relatively sparse compositions of Synthetic Cubism, but the notion of translating perceptions into eloquent planes and arranging them in defiance of conventional modes of representation remained constant throughout Braque's career. His themes remained constant as well: the familiar objects of the studio, the musical instruments he played, the interiors of his home and workplace, the occasional landscape or figure. It is difficult to assess changes in Braque's work from mid-career on, since he habitually worked and reworked paintings over long periods, but although he had no single way of making a picture (and, especially in his last two decades, he could be surprisingly uneven), his fundamental approach was more or less fixed by 1920. He constructed his pictures by spreading broad, clearly defined planes across the surface of the canvas, differentiating or amalgamating them as much by texture as by color and drawing.

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At the Guggenheim, Braque's development appeared seamless and, in spite of the presence of a fair number of less than good pictures, remarkably consistent. (When he fails, it is in relation to the high standard set by his own best pictures.) Yet Braque's change of gears from Fauvism to Cubism was made to seem abrupt and sudden. It wasn't as abrupt as all that. Fauvism itself drew heavily upon Cézanne's innovations, deriving its juxtapositions of contrasting colors from his way of constructing with patches of warm and cool tones. I suppose the little *Seated Nude,* 1907, from the Centre Georges Pompidou, with its patchy pink and green back, was intended to illustrate Braque's transition from Fauvist color to Cubist tonal planes, but key works still seemed to be missing. Visitors at the Guggenheim turned hastily back to the bay of Fauvist pictures from the first bay of Cubist works, as though searching for some illuminating link. Where, for example, was the angular dryad of 1907-08, supposedly painted after Braque saw Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* but, in fact, owing as much to Matisse as to anything of Picasso's? Missing, too, were the celebrated early landscapes with "cubic" houses, although, in compensation, there was the handsome still life of 1908, *Musical Instruments*, which Braque considered to be his first truly Cubist picture. Its large, simple forms, wrenched and flattened into a kind of visual omniscience, anticipate the earmarks of "developed" Cubism, as do its cool green and brown palette and, of course, its subject matter. The unusual clarity of *Musical Instruments* even prefigures the sparse structure of Braque's pasted papers of the early Teens.

In the best of the pictures that followed *Musical Instruments* over the next few years, Braque invented a new kind of pictorial wholeness and singleness. The patchiness that plagued his Fauvist work disappeared, not simply because of his switch to a more subtle, earth-toned palette. A new spatial notion heightens our awareness of these paintings as independent, startling objects. In Braque's pictures of 1912, such as the Centre Georges Pompidou's creamy *Fruit Dish, Bottle and Glass* or the Essen Folkwang Museum's robust oval, *The Table,* flickering glimpses of still life—bunches of grapes, wine bottles and glasses, a mandolin or perhaps a violin, newspapers and labels—are realized as detached bits of drawing that float in and against loosely painted planes of ochres, greys, and whites. Each geometric plane seems utterly transparent; it suggests an inflection of space but, at the same time, it appears about to subside into a continuous expanse of paint. The spotted and dotted surface seems as much about touch and material as it does about depiction.

Braque's Analytic Cubist images often seem fragile, ephemeral. They exist only in terms of paint on canvas, within the boundaries of the particular picture, unlike Picasso's works of the period, which often suggest buildable objects, like diagrams for sculpture. Braque's later pictures are more substantial, but even in his most sturdily constructed mature paintings an assertive two-dimensionality dominates. He never seems at home with three-dimensional illusion, not even in Cubism's rather offhand terms. His drawing is all edge, all boundary, as though he saw everything in silhouette, unlike Matisse, whose work bears witness to his acute sense of the world as made of articulated, solid objects that occupy space and his equally acute awareness of the flatness of the sheet of paper. Matisse's line is a taut graph of the co-existence of these perceptions; Braque's line stays on the surface. When he describes an object best, it is a distillation, a gathering of planes that, together or singly, stand for the object's most telling characteristic—like the green pear shape in *Still Life with Clarinet.* That's what accounts for Braque's oddly papery, steamrollered figures, and that explains why most of his sculpture is best ignored.

What Braque could do better than most was spread an image across a canvas, making every inch of surface count. There are no "backgrounds" in Braque's pictures, or at least not in the good ones. The ovals of his

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Analytic Cubist paintings read as tabletops—flat, substantial surfaces that support a fictive painted still life. Despite what the standard texts imply, they don't appear to have been created by fraying the image off at the edges. The enveloping darks of his buffet and mantelpiece still lifes of the late Teens and early Twenties never drop far behind the central massing of fruit, guitar, and sheet music but instead declare the surface of the canvas and exert pressure on the horizontally disposed image, apparently forcing the planes sideways. Everything pushes forward and outward, urgently; plane shoves against plane and against the edges of the canvas.

Braque seems to have discovered how to use this tendency to best advantage when he began to paste woodgrained paper on his paintings and drawings. The method is sometimes explained as his adaptation of techniques learned as a house painter and decorator, a kind of tongue-in-cheek shorthand, but the pasted papers answered strong formal needs as well. Braque had found a way of treating planes as single, continuous units, making them in one go by cutting or tearing instead of by repeated touches of the brush. The pasted papers turned the spatial ambiguities of Analytic Cubism into the reality of construction, and back again. The pasted plane, the chunk of actuality incorporated wholesale into the invented Cubist image, fluctuates between its new existence in the drawn and painted context and its unequivocal *presentness,* its infinitesimal relief against the flat surface of the paper. Drawn line, by contrast, becomes even more elusive and weightless; but the image, as a whole, because of the forthrightness and generosity of the pasted planes, gains a new limpidity and legibility.

Braque's collages are, almost without exception, extraordinary. He must have known how good they were and how rich their implications, since he made nearly sixty of them and they seem to have determined, to a considerable degree, the look of his mature work. Picasso, too, was quick to adopt the method, and both painters were soon imitating the clarity and textural distinctions of pasted papers on their canvases: they simplified their compositions, amalgamated multiple views into single shapes, and added sand to their paint, in order to achieve painted planes as distinct and substantial as collaged ones. At the Guggenheim, an ample selection of the *papiers collés* acknowledged their importance and high quality, but there were no surprises. It is always a delight to see even the most familiar of Braque's collages, such as the Museum of Modern Art's famous *Clarinet,* 1913, or *Still Life with Glass and Letters,* 1914 (the squared-off doughnut of planes that served as a virtual blueprint for one of David Smith's last stainless-steel sculptures), but it would have been exciting to see works from more far-flung collections. The National Gallery's 1982 exhibition, organized by E. A. Carmean, Jr., which assembled most of the *papiers collés,* was one of the most memorable shows of the last decade.

Braque believed that using collage greatly influenced how he used color. It allowed him to realize, he said, that "color acts simultaneously with form, but has nothing to do with it"—something that his spotty Fauvist painting of jugs might have suggested to him years before. Whatever the impetus, the Guggenheim exhibition made it obvious that Braque was a spectacular colorist, particularly after he abandoned the predictable oppositions of his Fauvist palette. His real strength becomes evident in his Cubist pictures and afterwards. Often, color saves an overcomplicated picture or stiffens a weak one. Braque was a master of neutrals, greys, and unnameable "tinted" blacks, and, too, of sinister greens, assonant rose-salmon-mauve conjunctions, peculiar peaches, and slate blues. Two New York painters who revel in brilliant, chromatic color told me how struck they were by Braque's color at the Guggenheim. "It must have taken courage," one of them said, "to use all those non-colors as colors." Braque's black, like Matisse's, is as vibrant as any of the spectrum hues in his pictures, but unlike Matisse, who made black an equivalent for dazzling light, Braque turns his darks into a palpable

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atmosphere from which other hues are dragged to the surface. The lesson of the *papiers collés* translates into a way of scumbling light, bright colors over a continuous darker ground, so that black-greys permeate and unify more brilliant colors at the same time that they set them off. Patches of color become luminous, discrete, brushy shapes at once detached from their surroundings and inextricable from the all-over painted surface.

The Guggenheim exhibition made Braque look like the master he was and, at the same time, like a problematic painter. Among the later works, there were, for example, the resonant billiard tables and studio interiors of the Forties and Fifties, some with large, pale bird forms penetrating their prismatic space. (The packed, richly patterned interiors of the late Thirties were inexplicably missing.) Some of the late pictures had the power of the elaborate vertical tabletop still lifes of the Twenties and Thirties, where Braque magically locked together table legs, floor patterns, wallpaper, dado, and densely piled still-life objects in a crusty sea of paint. Yet many of the late pictures seemed overloaded and arbitrarily divided, as though Braque had succumbed to a *horror vacui,* obsessively embellishing his painting until it threatened to disappear into a welter of small incidents. Still other late pictures, such as the all too familiar birds, seemed unbearably tentative. As a group, Braque's still lifes of the Twenties and Thirties, paintings of astonishing firmness and certainty, made with a relaxed hand and apparent ease, criticized much of the later work in Leymarie's selection. Düsseldorf's complex *Still Life with Fruit Dish, Bottle and Mandolin,* 1930, with its singing browns and blue-greys, or the stripped-down *Large Brown Still Life,* 1932, that hung in Braque's dining room—to name only two—set a standard that was hard to match.

The most difficult pictures to come to terms with are Braque's last, hesitant images of wheatfields and ploughs. He rarely painted landscapes after his pioneering Cubist pictures of houses and trees, but there is a

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group of potent, small-scale, mid-career paintings that are almost Japanese in their simplicity. Only one of these, *The Three Boats,* 1929, from the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, was hung at the Guggenheim. It's a tough little picture, with its dotted beach and scratched-out boats; it has an intensity that makes the inadequacy of the last landscapes explicit. (It does the same for Jennifer Bartlett's efforts.) Braque was ill and feeble, and consequently unable to paint for much of the last part of his life, so I suppose we should be grateful for whatever he was able to produce, but the last landscapes are not entirely worthy of him. They are disturbingly like elegant versions of Van Gogh's last painting of crows over a wheatfield, stripped of the ferocity. Braque reduces a farm landscape to a band of sky and a band of earth, punctuated with birds and the occasional farm machine. These archetypical wheatfields are simultaneously weak and overworked, as though the aged painter couldn't stop himself from adding more and more paint to his otherwise minimal image.

Braque deserves to be judged by his best and, happily, despite the gaps and his own lapses, there was plenty of his best at the Guggenheim. The catalogue, alas, is another story. It can be described only as deplorable. The entries on individual pictures and the essays by Leymarie and Magdalena M. Moeller are fairly informative and straightforward enough, if we allow for a translation that faithfully preserves the convolutions of the originals. But the chapter on Braque's "Cubist phase" by Carla Schulz-Hoffmann is an excruciating, obscurantist exercise in pedantry. After five pages of impenetrable explications of the self-evident, Ms. Schulz-Hoffmann tackles the Cubist collage:

> This procedure evinces a certain analogy with the idea of eidetic reduction in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, though this should not be taken to imply a direct influence; what is meant, rather, is a presumably unconscious simultaneity of parallel notions. Guy Habasque, who was the first to examine this analogy in his article "Cubisme et Phénomenologie," comes to the conclusion that with this "phenomenological method" Synthetic Cubism introduced "a priori knowledge" into painting. However, one can only agree with this conclusion if one accepts Husserl's eidetic-intuitive approach as generally binding.

If the catalogue's illustrations were brilliant, the text might be supportable; but although virtually every work in the Guggenheim's collection is reproduced in color, the plates are appalling. The kindest explanation is that the plates simply weren't proofed, but that doesn't excuse the inaccuracy of the color reproductions; any plate that isn't much too red is much too yellow or too blue, purples become orange, leaf greens become mustard, ochres become grey when they don't turn chartreuse, and in one amazing transformation a *rose-fanée* guitar is reproduced in blue. One plate is upside down. Braque deserves better.

In the end, Braque is good enough to survive the dreadful catalogue and the caprice of museum selection. He emerges from the Guggenheim exhibition as one of the most elegant, intelligent, and disciplined of painters, passionate but restrained. As he wrote in 1917: "Nobility grows out of contained emotion. Emotion should not be rendered by an excited trembling; it can neither be added on nor be imitated. It is the seed, the work is the flower. I like the rule that corrects the emotion."

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Hockney's people

by Jed Perl

Summer, 1988. New York City is sweltering. Many of the beaches in Brooklyn and on Long Island are closed as sewage and hospital wastes mysteriously wash ashore. Ecosystems are collapsing. In the art world as well, trash keeps rising to the surface. *Art in America*'s special number, devoted to "Art and Money," hits the newsstands. It's a report on the many ways in which the art market is running out of control. The tone approaches celebration: one man's calamity is another man's triumph. Meanwhile, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, David Hockney, who knows something about sunbathing and something about art-and-money, is the subject of a retrospective that opened in June, before people had begun leaving town.[1] If anyone stuck in the city opts for Hockney on one of those weekends when the beaches are closed, they'll probably look a little unkindly on his idyllic scenes of Los Angeles backyards and swimming pools. Above all else, Hockney wants us to like him. His subjects are leisure-time fun, modern relationships, and the buyables we all want to surround ourselves with. Slipping into his show is like opening the *Times* to the "Home" section—you're avoiding the real stuff. His art, which is about life styles, aims for the same lowest common denominator that we encounter on the life-style pages of the newspapers. Hockney is an obvious right choice for a summer show, because so much of his work deals with vacation pleasures. But in New York in the summer, when everything is going to extremes, the mild, a-little-of-this-a-little-of-that rhythm of his enormous retrospective wilts pretty quick.

We're at a point in history when an extraordinarily large middle-class public feels the urge to go to museums and keep abreast of developments in the visual arts. The goings-on in the museums are written up in the papers; and Hockney's work brings inside the museum's walls the mood of casual pleasure that the audience pursues outside. Hockney gives us pleasure without obsession, pleasure in little doses. His shifts of manner and medium—from loose painting to tight painting and then back; or from painting to printmaking to photography and back to printmaking—lend the exhibition a provisional, easy-going mood. When contemporary artists are working deep inside painting and sculpture the very intensity of their engagement tends to isolate them from the public at large. People know that there's a limit to how much art obsession

1 "David Hockney: A Retrospective" was on view at the Metropolitan Museum in New York from June 18 through August 14, and is scheduled to open at the Tate Gallery in London in late October. The exhibition was organized by Los Angeles County Museum of Art curators Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman. The catalogue, which includes essays by Henry Geldzahler, Christopher Knight, Gert Schiff, and Lawrence Wechsler, is published by Abrams in conjunction with LACMA (288 pages, $49.50).

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they can deal with, and they're confident that Hockney won't overburden them.

The couples and sunbathers and swimming pools and patios are what we leave the Hockney show remembering. Through these subjects, Hockney proves to us that he knows a bit about life. The 1968 double portrait of Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy—in which the compact, hawklike Isherwood turns to look at his lover—is answered, fifteen years later, by the photo-collage of Isherwood and Bachardy—in which Bachardy, gray-haired and still extremely handsome, returns the gaze. There's a rightness in that exchange of glances: it tells us something about the affection and dependency that goes into a long-term relationship. It tells us what most everybody knows. Seeing the double portrait of Fred and Marcia Weisman (1968), you learn something about them, too—about the well-padded style of upper-class life in Southern California and how it lends marriages a certain calm surface. Above all else, Hockney knows that we want to feel comfortable in the world. Just look at Ossie Clark, sinking his bare feet into the deep white shag carpet in the portrait of *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* (a cat). The carpet and the bare feet are souvenirs of the London that Michelangelo Antonioni brought to America in his movie *Blow-Up*. *Mr. and Mrs. Clark* is Hockney's synthesis of Mod London and a Neoclassical mise-en-scène. "This is our life," the artist seems to say. (It's what smart adolescents imagine life to be.) And for all the museum-goers who feel they've missed out on the fun, there's the titillation of the famous friends, the easy sex, the no-fault bohemia. But Hockney is a responsible fellow, too. He likes to go back to his hometown, Bradford, and paint portraits of Mom and Dad. Those disinclined to forgive him for the Boyfriend will surely do so after they've seen the Mother. At the end of the retrospective, in the gift shop, there's a video monitor where a tape of Hockney talking plays all the time. With his chubby cheeks, big round glasses, and fringe of silver hair, he's an aging kid. Visitors are invited to share in the triumph of the boy from the Midlands who went to art school, winged it, and won.

On the Acoustiguide tape that the artist, in a characteristically audience-friendly gesture, has narrated himself, Hockney comments that the three cities the show is visiting—Los Angeles, New York, and London—are the three cities that have been essential to his art. Watching Hockney go from Swinging London through Laid-back L. A. to some recent essays in East Village Primitive is a little like watching the Audrey Hepburn-Albert Finney marriage go through changes of costume in Stanley Donen's *Two for the Road*. The period scenery is brought off with comic panache. But the amusing, style-is-all message keeps getting derailed in the reach for something else—in Hockney's case, in the reach for deep structure, deep content. On the audio tour, which is probably the closest many viewers will ever come to listening one-on-one to an artist talking, Hockney discusses isometric and reverse perspective, and describes his "struggle to make a very clear space." He relates bits of information about his studio procedures. In *A Bigger Splash* (1967), the flat surface of a backyard swimming pool is disturbed by a spritz of white foam—the aftershock of a diver who has just disappeared beneath the surface. Of this painting Hockney observes that "something that lasts fractions of a second took me two weeks to paint. There's a kind of contradiction in this that interested me." Hockney narrates in friendly, even tones, as if the struggles were all behind him.

Trained at London's Royal College of Art as Fifties turned to Sixties, Hockney quickly gained a reputation as one of the young whippersnappers of English art. But even the cartoonish paintings he did in the Sixties with more than a nod to Dubuffet have a staidly intellectual aroma. In spite of the many years he's lived in America, Hockney remains an archetypal English artist; he watches the great events of European pictorial art from a balcony seat in London

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town. Hockney always paints with an eye trained on French hedonism (and he's made some insightful remarks about Raoul Dufy and the later Picasso). All in all, though, his is a rather academic, Bloomsburyish view of Paris. When Matisse or Bonnard or Dufy (all artists Hockney admires) move their colors into a composition that clicks and sends us swooning, they allow us, at the same time, to see things utterly clear. Their effects are totally honest. Hockney is more like Duncan Grant or Vanessa Bell (though he's never done anything that's as unaffected as a few of the early Bell still lifes). He wants the ecstasy without the murderous hard work. No one can criticize Hockney for not achieving painting magic—that's given to very few; but we have a right to wonder why he never seems to be working toward painting magic. There's a moral dimension to French hedonism that eludes this Englishman. When Hockney paints in happy colors the result isn't happiness, it's cheerfulness. In the anti-painting Seventies Hockney maintained a commitment to old-fashioned painting that has given him a bit of an I-told-you-so status in the pro-painting Eighties. But if Hockney has managed to give the impression of being on the welcoming committee when everybody else returned to tradition, he's also taken pretty extensive vacations himself.

Hockney's inveterate snapshot photography originated in the homosexual culture of the early Sixties, when commercial pornography was hard to come by and everybody had a collection of homemade shots secreted in an album. As his snapshots and the related drawings and prints of California blonds lying between rumpled sheets began to be widely circulated in the late Sixties, what caught people's attention wasn't the newness of the imagery so much as the move of a soft-porn aesthetic into mainstream venues. Hockney is a popularizer. His big pressed paper pulp prints of the Seventies carried the high tide of the printmaking boom into neo-Matissean, billboard-bright images that captivated an audience way beyond the art world. (Like almost every-

important works by

balthus
butler
chagall
dubuffet
giacometti
lam
mac iver
mason
millares
miró
riopelle
rouan
saura
tanguy
zao wou-ki

pierre matisse gallery
41 east 57th street
new york 10022

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thing Hockney does, the paper pulp prints were turned into a best-selling art book.) The Polaroids of the Seventies were a response to the photography boom; and the recent prints made on Xerox machines bring the kind of experimentation that has been featured for years at downtown outposts such as Printed Matter onto Fifty-seventh Street, where André Emmerich showed what Hockney calls his "Home Made Prints" in December, 1986, at prices ranging from sixteen hundred to thirty-six hundred dollars. Doing Cubism with a Polaroid camera, or claiming the Xerox machine as a vehicle for high art, Hockney is never less than a quick study. He tickles the public with the thought that anybody who has a Polaroid camera or an office copier can do something artistic. Or maybe the appeal is the reverse, and people see Hockney as a genius who can do creative things that are beyond mere mortals, using the ordinary machines we all have at home and in the office.

By the time you read this, the Hockney retrospective will be hanging in the Tate Gallery in London, and the other hot contemporary art ticket of 1988, the Anselm Kiefer retrospective, will have opened at New York's Museum of Modern Art. That neither show originated in New York tells us something about the state of the contemporary museum world: arts institutions are de-centralizing in an effort to tap new sources of public and private funds. That both shows have been celebrated mostly for their subject matter tells us much more. Hockney is the fantasy of everything we want life to be, and Kiefer, with his overtones of Nazi disasters, is the nightmare of what the world became and could again become. As Hilton Kramer commented in *The New York Observer*, only a very small percentage of the museum-going public will realize that Hockney can't do anything much with colors and with paint. I don't think Kiefer can do too much more. We have, among our contemporary artists, better hedonists than Hockney and better expressionists than Kiefer. But no top-flight contemporary has Kiefer's or Hockney's mass appeal. Kiefer likes to invoke Richard Wagner, an artist who merged popular feeling and elevated taste into a new art form. Hockney, who recently did sets for a production of *Tristan und Isolde* in Los Angeles, has scored some honorable successes in theatrical design, where his desire to please can be a strength. Nonetheless, the popularity of the Hockney and Kiefer retrospectives has to do with a mistaken idea that the visual arts can, in a very direct way, tell us who we are. Painting resists easy revelations. In the long run, that's its strength, its staying power. People who go to museums now are looking for the punch line which they can blow up into a moral. Hockney equals pleasure, Kiefer equals pain. Together, they're as neatly balanced as yin and yang. Inside the upscale packaging, kitsch lives.

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Bryan Hunt at Cornell

by Eric Gibson

The career of the forty-one-year-old artist Bryan Hunt is, by Eighties standards, an anomalous one. His first one-man show, at SoHo's Clocktower gallery in 1974, was well received; and by the early Eighties, at a time when critical and commercial attention was focused mainly on painters, he was one of the few sculptors to have achieved a measure of recognition. Even so, none of this has resulted in the kind of major visibility accorded to other artists of his generation who have had similarly auspicious beginnings. There's been no mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum, for example, as there was last season for Julian Schnabel and Elizabeth Murray.

Thus we can be grateful for the show this spring at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University entitled "Falls and Figures."[1] The Show gathered together some fifty of Hunt's drawings and sculptures from the last fifteen years, concentrating on his signature "waterfalls"—free-standing vertical ribbons of bronze resembling cascades of water halted in mid-flow—and the abstract drapery-like figures that evolved out of them. It wasn't a perfect exhibition—the "falls" work better than the "figures"—but it was worthwhile for the insights it offered into Hunt's evolution as an artist.

In the early Seventies, when he began making sculpture, Hunt shared with many of his contemporaries a desire to amplify the austerely abstract language of the time by introducing representational elements—subject matter, in other words. His approach was to replicate well-known, recognizable structures, to reduce their size, and to remove them from their environment. These sculptures had an iconic, Pop art flavor, but their displacements distanced them just enough from recognizable reality to make them useful foils for purely sculptural questions, too. Thus, *Hoover Dam,* reduced to eight feet but still larger than human-size, made one as conscious of scale as Tony Smith's famous *Die* (1962), a six-foot cube. Similarly, a large model of the Empire State Building, with an airship moored to its spire, was partly urban fantasy, partly an occasion for taking up the question of sculpture's base by focusing the viewer's attention away from the ground. (Hunt later made a series of individual airships, mooring them high on a wall, where they projected into the room.) In *Wall of China (Nankow Pass)*, Hunt attached a miniature section of the Great Wall

1 "Bryan Hunt: Falls and Figures" was on view at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, from March 29 to May 22. It will be shown at the Fort Worth Art Museum from September 11 to November 6, and the Center for the Arts, Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania, from January 19 to February 25, 1989. The exhibition was organized by Nancy E. Green, associate curator of prints and photographs at the Johnson Museum. An illustrated catalogue with an essay by the art critic Phyllis Tuchman is available for $16.

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to the gallery wall, not horizontally but vertically, letting it hang down plumb like a necktie. Because of the re-orientation, *Wall of China* was the kind of half-relief, half-object familiar from the abstract sculptures of John Duff and others. This early work of Hunt's was similar in outlook to that of the New Image painters, artists such as Susan Rothenberg and Robert Moskowitz, who at the time were likewise using recognizable imagery in non-representational, abstract ways.

The "waterfalls" begin in the late Seventies. At Cornell, where there were some half a dozen installed in the museum's largest gallery, the waterfalls were accorded primary importance. Rightly so, for they are Hunt's best work so far. They mark a shift in balance in his work. The aim of integrating figuration and purely sculptural concerns is still there, but it is handled at once more explicitly and more subtly, with a more even balance between a recognizable image and its abstract function.

Individually and as a group, the waterfalls make a singular spectacle. Slender, free-standing columns of sculptural form, they seem to originate out of nowhere a few feet above the viewer's head and then drop to the floor. Each one is an insubstantial line of liquid frozen in motion, poised in space in perpetual defiance of gravity. The waterfalls are tall—monumental, even—planar forms with irregular edges whose forward surface, an "all-over" pattern of shallow nicks and indentations, has been modeled so as to be both a convincing equivalent of water and richly sensuous in its own right. At the same time, their height and broken surface—which has the quality of drapery—give the waterfalls a distinctly human aspect.

This anthropomorphism is particularly noticeable in the sculptures which have a sort of shelf or ledge formed by a momentary horizontal break in the vertical rhythm of the piece. On one level, it reads as a brief change in the course of the water's flow. Looked at again, it becomes the lap of a seated figure. Hunt's waterfalls are images of transience and insubstantiality mysteriously endowed with the silent, hieratic presence of ancient deities. Central to Hunt's success is his material. Bronze is ideal for the sort of liquid, light-catching surface manipulations that suggest water. Yet it is sufficiently sturdy to support itself in vertical extension.

It is more than bronze that explains Hunt's remarkable achievement in the waterfalls, however. Countering the strict literalism that has governed most sculpture since the Sixties, Hunt makes illusionism the central concern in his work. The waterfalls offer, in the most convincingly three-dimensional way, a visual experience that is essentially pictorial.

Although at Cornell the waterfalls were supported by shallow discs painted to blend in with the floor, they normally do not depend on a visible support. Hunt's illusionism thus signals a new attitude to the base. Generally, modern sculpture rests on, incorporates, or springs away from its base, but Hunt's waterfalls, aside from a slight widening and thickening at the bottom, don't relate to a support in any of these ways. As they plunge toward the floor, it is unclear whether we are to read them as cut off by or continuing through it. In essence, they have no support at all.

The image of cascading water is, of course, the centerpiece of Hunt's illusionism, and here too he gives a new twist to another of modern sculpture's central ideas. Where other sculptors have sought to set form in motion (sometimes literally), Hunt arrests it. He brings motion—and with it, time—to a halt, holding both in a permanent state of suspension.

The illusionism is reinforced in other ways. Though tall and sufficiently broad, these sculptures have almost no physical depth. They appear more two- than three-dimensional, a fact which makes it difficult for the viewer to feel he has a sure visual grasp of a work. One finds oneself—in an experience reminiscent of viewing Giacometti's figures—constantly shifting one's position in a vain search for the perfect vantage point.

The pronounced physical flatness of the

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waterfalls is at odds with Hunt's agitated surfaces, which imply deeper eddies and currents beneath those we see. The key to this effect of false depth is to be found in Hunt's modeling, which is uniformly shallow, consisting of notches, grooves, and other indentations rather than outward accumulations of matter.

Hunt's method not only preserves the flatness of the whole form but reinforces its pictorialism by creating an implicit foreground plane out of the evenly raised ridges between the recessions. He turns the free-standing waterfalls into a species of sculptural relief. Indeed, they appear to be nothing so much as reliefs cut away from their background planes and set out "bare." They thus stand somewhere between Matisse's *Back* reliefs, with their mixture of frontality and human scale, and the elusive opticality of Giacometti's post-war figurative sculpture.

In the "figures" that follow the waterfalls, Hunt reduces the height and adjusts the proportions of his work to make both conform more closely to those of the human figure. At the same time, the surface ruts are drawn out and made more rhythmic to suggest, in place of a stilled cascade of water, the flowing lines of drapery. These figures or figure-analogues (some have only a tenuous link to the human form) stand or half-sit, supported by linear, openwork steel armatures on geometric, limestone bases.

No doubt for Hunt it was a logical step to develop the figural implications of the waterfalls. But it turns out to have been not nearly so successful in its realization. After the waterfalls, in fact, the figures come as an anticlimax. They are abstract figures, to be sure, but it is the sort of abstraction which alters nature without transforming it.

In contrast to the concise, self-contained formal language of the waterfalls, the figures are, as it were, all over the place, essaying an odd variety of styles. *Neptune* situates the "figure" within a Constructivist matrix of planes and rectilinearity, while *Astronomer* affects a Surrealist air. Elsewhere, Hunt's figure-forms are thick and heavy, appearing to sag under their own weight. And his handling is generally too Baroque—the modeling is small and choppy or over-long and too deeply gouged. In either case our eye is held to the surface instead of being free to read the surface as one element in a whole. In all these erratic manipulations, Hunt appears to be trying to fan into renewed brilliance the guttering flame of an idea. To no avail.

"Falls and Figures," then, was a mixed blessing. At Cornell, Hunt appeared divided against himself, and not simply because splendid work was juxtaposed with weaker fare. The idea that these two phases of Hunt's work are linked in any more than a superficial way is, I think, flawed. Rather, they occupy two distinct places in Hunt's career.

The waterfalls embody, and bring to a kind of a climax, ideas present from the beginning of Hunt's career. Among them are the isolation of an image from its real-world context, and an interest in gravity and elevation—getting sculpture up off the ground and somehow making it stay there. The waterfalls mark the high point—and close—of the first phase of Hunt's career. The later figures have formal antecedents in the waterfalls, but since each one is set in some sort of context, and placed on a base which then rests on the floor, they constitute a much more traditional mode of figurative sculpture. In relation to the waterfalls, the later figures represent, at best, a kind of coda. Perhaps they are also the first tentative stages of a new direction. In the final analysis, it was a balanced view that one took away from the exhibition: that of an artist of considerable promise and achievement who has yet to prove himself fully.

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Books

The poetry of Robert Graves

by Robert Richman

I stood beneath the wall
And there defied them all.
—Robert Graves in "The Assault Heroic"

At the time of his death in December 1985, at the age of ninety, on the island of Majorca, Robert Graves had long been a legendary figure in the literary world. This was due in part to his immense production: nineteen novels and short-story collections, sixty-three books of nonfiction (including translations), and fifty-six volumes of poetry. Because of this extraordinary productivity, Graves is the only serious writer of our time whose career was on a scale we associate more with the previous century than with our own.

Yet there is another and more important reason why Robert Graves became a figure of legend in the literary world of his time. This was his reputation as a rebel. Graves's fame as a cranky individualist derives, first of all, from his well-known autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*, published to coincide with his departure from England in 1929. (He went to Majorca, where he remained until the Spanish Civil War caused him to leave in 1936; ten years later he returned to the island and lived out the rest of his life there.) No reader of *Goodbye to All That* will forget Graves's bitter account of his youth in Edwardian England—especially the grim years at Charterhouse, the public school he attended between 1910 and 1914—or his moving portrayal of the war that devastated his generation and almost cost him his life.

Graves was part of the literary generation that was profoundly altered by the war. For some, the response took a political form. In the case of Graves, the war only confirmed what he had learned to despise at school. To him, the nastiness of the generals was a larger and more lethal version of the nastiness of his masters at Charterhouse. As he writes in *Goodbye to All That*:

> . . . we [the soldiers] could no longer see the war as one between trade rivals: its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder.

Especially vile to Graves was the generals' cynical misuse of the army's regimental pride. His war experiences resulted in Graves's permanent alienation from his country.

When Graves left England in 1929, however, he was fleeing something more than painful memories. He was also running away from the modern world. Poetry, he said, was his "ruling passion," and he had come to believe that the modern world had little use for poetry, or for the myths that, in his view, it was derived from. The literary and historical works Graves began producing once he settled in Majorca—works which consistently confounded critics and scholars—were clearly conceived by Graves as a means of avenging himself on the modern world he found so loathsome.

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These books were not the only strange things emanating from the island, however. Rumors of a liberated sexual atmosphere in the Graves's household also filtered to the world beyond Majorca. It was said—correctly—that Graves shared his bed with numerous "muses." It was also said—incorrectly—that Graves had fathered half the children born on Majorca between 1929 and 1975. So well known were Graves's emancipated views on such matters that in the Sixties Majorca became a mecca for hippies seeking escape from conventional moral taboos. Some no doubt also came for advice on the proper consumption of hallucinogens, the use of which Graves had advocated in his *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (1962).

There are some ironies, to be sure, in Graves's posture as a rebel. For one thing, although the content of many of his books is unconventional, the writing itself isn't. The poems are in fact written in a traditional style. His prosody might even be described as conservative. In *Goodbye to All That*, he attempted to account for his dual literary nature by pointing to his family history. His father's side of the family, he said, was cold, rational, and "anti-sentimental to the point of insolence," while his mother's side was gentle, "gemütlich," "noble and patient."

Another irony is that Graves in his own life craved guidance. This is nowhere better seen than in his thirteen-year association with the American poet Laura Riding. In the early Twenties, Riding was affiliated with John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, and with their Fugitive group, which espoused regionalism in literature. Ransom used the occasion of a review in *The Fugitive* of Graves's *On English Poetry* to praise the English poet for his ability to express his "charming personality . . . without embarrassment in prosodical verse," something certain unnamed "brilliant minds" (i.e., Pound and Eliot) were, in Ransom's view, unable to do. At Ransom's urging Graves initiated a correspondence with Riding in 1924. Two years later she arrived in England and moved into Graves's house. Graves's growing attachment to Riding resulted in his separation in 1929 from his first wife, Nancy Nicholson.

The Graves-Riding partnership was a curious one, to say the least. Judging from Martin Seymour-Smith's 1982 biography of Graves,[1] it could easily be characterized by the title of one of Graves's poems: "Sick Love." For Graves, Riding was, variously, the incarnation of an ancient Mediterranean moon goddess, the embodiment of the perfection of poetry itself, and a feminist advocating the overthrow of male-dominated society. Whatever role she played, she demanded, and received, total fealty from her subject. The Graves-Riding bond involved far more than Graves's relinquishing the household to her, or submitting his poems to her for approval, or accepting a subordinate role in their "joint" literary endeavors—all of which he did. The fact is, she treated him, as Tom Matthews, an American writer who stayed with the couple in 1932, observed, "like a dog. There was no prettier way to put it." Matthews, whose testimony is recorded in Seymour-Smith's book, wrote that Graves

> seemed in a constant swivet of anxiety to please her, to forestall her every wish, like a small boy dancing attendance on a rich aunt of uncertain temper . . . . Since I admired him and looked up to him as a dedicated poet and a professional writer, his subservience to her and her contemptuous bearings towards him troubled and embarrassed me . . . she was not so much his mistress as his master . . . .

So enthralled was Graves with Riding that he even emulated her in a (pre-Majorca) 1929 suicide attempt, undertaken because she loved a third party (one Geoffrey Phibbs) and Phibbs loved Nancy Nicholson. Graves leapt from a third-story window after Riding had jumped from the floor above. (This had been preceded by Riding's drinking Lysol, to no effect.) Graves escaped unscathed; Riding suffered a compound

1 *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* was published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

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fracture of the spine. According to Seymour-Smith, the police's grilling of Graves after this incident was "one of the experiences that made him want to leave England."

The sources of Graves's idealization of and submission to Laura Riding are well documented in the recently published *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926* by Richard Perceval Graves, the first installment of a proposed three-volume biography of Graves by his nephew.[2] This volume, which is based on heretofore unreleased family letters, diaries, and extracts from a memoir of Robert by Perceval Graves's father, is a biographical undertaking of a different kind from Seymour-Smith's. Seymour-Smith's narrative is a more or less objective rendering of events. Perceval Graves's book, on the other hand, is a chronology of Robert's shifting psychological states. As a means of understanding the poetry, this approach leaves much to be desired. But it is invaluable for comprehending the childhood sources of Graves's bizarre behavior toward Riding. One is certainly given a sense, by both Seymour-Smith and Graves himself in *Goodbye to All That,* of the moralistic tenor of the Graves family household. "We learned to be strong moralists, and spent much of our time on self-examination and good resolutions," writes Graves in *Goodbye to All That.*

But the revelations in those two volumes pale in comparison to what Perceval Graves divulges. It appears the demand for moral perfection in the Graves home was constant and shrill. The letters Robert's mother wrote to her children at school are the best evidence of this. These letters, none of which are quoted, "were so emotional and intense," writes Perceval Graves,

> that as I read them more than seventy years later I cannot help feeling terribly sad that my father's generation of the family were subjected to such intense moral pressure. So often, Amy [Graves's mother] seems to be equating personal worth with the almost impossibly saintly behavior and self-sacrifice which she was accustomed to demand of herself. Any falling short of the highest ideals is greeted with a terrible sorrow, all the more devastating for being couched in such loving language.

The mania for purity pervaded every aspect of the children's lives. According to Perceval Graves, Robert's father would become enraged when he saw "a corner of a page folded down to mark a place, or—still worse—a book left open and face down." The attempt to make the children morally spotless, Graves says in *Goodbye to All That,* gave him and his siblings "no hint of [the world's] dirtiness and intrigue and lustfulness." As Perceval Graves says about this remark: "the very words Robert chooses to describe this show the extent to which he had been affected by [his mother's] moralizing." The result is that it was "very hard," according to Perceval Graves, "for [Robert] to come to terms with the world as it really is."

This puts the matter too benignly, however. What Graves was left with was a truly disabling horror of reality, particularly sexual reality. The disgust Graves expresses in *Goodbye to All That* at the soldiers' custom of picking up local girls offers some indication of this, as does his reaction to a girl's advances in a Brussels pension in 1913: "I was so frightened," he said, "I could have killed her." Seymour-Smith observes that "physical desire and the sexual act, the 'thing,' is what terrifies [Graves]."

Graves's craving for purity was undoubtedly one source of his poetry, in which he creates a timeless realm beyond history. (In *Poetic Unreason,* his Oxford thesis that was published in 1925, Graves describes poetry as something as "remote and unrealizable an ideal as perfection.") It also helps one understand Graves's taste for Laura Riding's poetry, the principal feature of which is her self-chastisement for not having attained the requisite flawlessness.

2 *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926* (387 pages, $24.95) was published last year by Viking.

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Graves's craving for purity also sheds light on his attraction first to Nancy Nicholson—a feminist crusader—and then to Riding. In both cases, Graves tried to escape the world's "dirtiness and intrigue and lustfulness" by submitting himself to someone he invested with redemptive, cleansing powers. (So numinous a realm did Riding inhabit that after a point in their relationship she refused to sleep with him.) Riding's "unquiet nature and propensity to criticize," says Seymour-Smith, "was something that Graves was no doubt unconsciously seeking out." Perhaps it is not all that surprising that Graves, who went to such lengths to spurn what he deemed to be the suffocating moralism of England, became involved with strong-minded women like Nicholson and Riding. The fact is, in England or out, Graves could never escape the stern moralism of family, school, or military; he took it with him wherever he went.

Randall Jarrell believed that Graves's poetry, along with the theory of poetry he constructed around it, was a sublimation of his life with Laura Riding. There is little reason to disagree. At the heart of Graves's theory is the idea that all "true" poetry is an invocation of the Mother-Goddess who ruled the world up to the thirteenth century B.C. What Mother-Goddess? you might ask. Well, Graves claimed to have discovered evidence of an ancient matriarchal cult while reading for *Hercules, My Shipmate* (1945), a retelling of the travels of Jason and the Argonauts. With clues taken from Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and other anthropological works, Graves concluded that the Mother-Goddess had been ousted by thirteenth-century B.C. invaders of what is now Greece. These invaders installed in her place the Olympian gods. The legacy of this momentous shift in spiritual power is Western civilization as we know it, with its (in Graves's view) undue emphasis on rationality and order, and distrust of magic and myths—indeed, all forms of "poetic unreason."

The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth, Graves's 1948 study of Britain's own dethroned Goddess and her con-

Arikha
Balthus
Braque
Cezanne
Dubuffet
Frankenthaler
Giacometti
Graves
Guston
Hockney
Johns
Kelly
de Kooning
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nection to the Mediterranean one, is without a doubt the author at his crankiest. In the words of the critic Douglas Day, the book is "a curious blend of fact and fancy, an often impenetrable wilderness of cryptology, obscure learning, and apparently *non sequitur* reasoning brought to bear on a thesis that has its roots partly in historic fact, partly in generally accepted anthropological hypotheses, and partly in pure poetic intuition."[3] Suffice to say that Graves's attempt to prove the existence of this matriarchal religion—which involved him in readings of medieval Welsh poems, analyses of secret Druidic alphabets, musings on ancient tree-worship, and correlations between Greek and Celtic myth—was fervently rejected by anthropologists and literary critics alike. But this never shook Graves's confidence, for *The White Goddess* was in his eyes a document of faith. And its debunking by "rational" critics—who (Graves would assert) are products of a patriarchal society and therefore on a covert search-and-destroy mission for every contemporary manifestation of the Goddess—only served to intensify his devotion. It was the same kind of devotion he had evinced for Riding, who appears to have been for Graves a rare embodiment of the long-lost Goddess.

Poetry, an invocation of this beleaguered antique Muse, was, according to Graves, the most meaningful writing a Goddess-worshipper could undertake. As a result, Graves was quite candid about the ancillary role his books of nonfiction and historical fiction played in his life. These volumes, Graves said, were the "show dogs I breed and sell to support the cat." This does not mean, however, that Graves ever passed up the chance to use these books as a means of correcting the false history propagated by various anti-Goddess forces. In *Wife to Mr. Milton* (1943), for example, the English poet is portrayed as a ranting Puritan and his wife Marie as the epitome of charm. (The reverse is closer to the truth.) *Hercules, My Shipmate,* the British title of which is *The Golden Fleece,* argues that the triumphs of Jason and the Argonauts in the Mediterranean, and their recapture of the fleece, occurred because Jason had been blessed by the White Goddess. *Homer's Daughter* (1955) takes off from Samuel Butler's conviction that the *Odyssey* was written not by Homer but by the woman who calls herself Nausicaa in the story. Not surprisingly, the books written before Graves's mythological "discovery"—*I, Claudius* (1934), *Claudius the God* (1935), *Count Belisarius* (1938), and *King Jesus* (1943)—show a deep need for some redeeming force. Throughout these popular historical novels is Graves's preoccupation with the unhappy fate of a pure soul in a corrupt and lustful world.

Graves's rewriting of the past was not his only means of demonstrating his obeisance to Riding and the White Goddess. It can also be seen in his refusal to develop original plots or psychologically persuasive characters. Judging from these novels, at least, it would appear that the Muse tolerated from her vassal no extra-poetic invention. "There is one story and one story only," goes the first line of Graves's well-known poem "To Juan at the Winter Solstice," and Graves seems to have believed this with all his heart. As entertaining as many of these novels are—and *I, Claudius, King Jesus,* and *Count Belisarius* are certainly good reads—all have an extremely short imaginative reach.

Most of Graves's nonfiction is similarly scarred. The underlying assumption of both *The Greek Myths* (1955) and *The Hebrew Myths* (1964) is the suppression of the various manifestations of the Goddess in antiquity. Graves's literary criticism, the bulk of which is collected in *The Crowning Privilege* (1955), has the same narrow focus. Many of the essays seek to expose the rational impulse that has helped undermine "true" poetry throughout the centuries. As one would expect, Graves detests the poetry of Eliot, Pound, and Stevens. In his view, the motives of these modernist poets are critical, not creative.

3 From "The Coming of the Goddess" by Douglas Day, in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Graves,* edited by Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishers).

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Perhaps the most important contribution Graves makes in his criticism is his advocacy of the plain style. In a letter from 1920, Graves declared that he wanted to be "able to write . . . with as much economy of words & simplicity of expression as possible." Whatever the other defects of his prose, his loyalty to this principle was unwavering.

The one book that does survive as a prose classic is *Goodbye to All That*. Graves's autobiography, which was revised thoroughly in 1957—the original edition was written hastily and poorly—is without a doubt his most important book. It captures the spirit of rebellion—of a young man's bursting free of the shackles of his elders—in a way that few other books of our time do. In the very first pages, Graves writes:

> About this business of being a gentleman: I paid so heavily for the fourteen years of my gentleman's education that I feel entitled, now and then, to get some sort of return.

This refreshingly heady swagger continues to the end of the book.

Nevertheless, posterity will remember Graves best not as a novelist, mythographer, or biographical legend, but as a poet. Graves himself insisted on this, and his critics have obliged. But even if they are right to focus principally on the poetry—for it *is* the part of Graves's oeuvre that has the greatest claim on our attention—many have been inclined to make extravagant and faulty judgments of it. Jarrell declared "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" to be one of the century's greatest poems. Martin Seymour-Smith referred to Graves as "the foremost English-language love poet of this century—and probably of the two preceding ones, too." And Perceval Graves writes that his uncle "has come to be regarded as one of the finest poets of the twentieth century."

These claims are unwarranted. Reading through the newly re-issued 1975 edition of Graves's *Collected Poems*,[4] one is struck by how fine some of them are. But one is also struck by how much the verse sinks from the weight of the "one story and one story only," especially the later poems. What impairs the majority of the poems, however, is not the presence of the Goddess theme so much as its treatment. For in a way, Graves is correct: good poetry is on some level an invocation of the Muse, if the Muse is indeed the embodiment of poetic intuition. The bulk of Graves's verse is marred because he persists in addressing the Muse directly instead of allowing the poem to invoke her implicitly. If Graves had not been so often compelled to be literal—that is, anti-symbolical and anti-metaphorical—he probably would have been freer to take on a wider range of emotional and thematic concerns in his verse. As it is, too large a percentage of his poems are like "In Her Praise":

> This they know well: the Goddess yet abides.
> Though each new lovely woman whom she rides,
> Straddling her neck a year or two or three,
> Should sink beneath such weight of majesty
> And, groping back to humankind, gainsay
> The headlong power that whitened all her way
> With a broad track of trefoil—leaving you,
> Her chosen lover, ever again thrust through
> With daggers, your purse rifled, your rings gone—
> Nevertheless they call you to live on
> To parley with the pure, oracular dead,
> To hear the wild pack whimpering overhead,
> To watch the moon tugging at her cold tides.
> Woman is mortal woman. She abides.

On the level of language and technique, this poem is unobjectionable. What undoes "In Her Praise" is its content. By discussing his conception of the Goddess, rather than presenting his emotional response to her, Graves diminishes the poem's effectiveness, and he shuts out those readers who do not share his almost religious devotion to her.

"To Juan at the Winter Solstice," the poem Randall Jarrell thought so much of, is a much better poem, if not a great one. It works as well as it does because its charged,

4 Oxford University Press; 592 pages, $27.50.

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resonant language redeems the "one story and one story only":

There is one story and one story only
That will prove worth your telling,
Whether as learned bard or gifted child;
To it all lines or lesser gauds belong
That startle with their shining
Such common stories as they stray into.

Is it of trees you tell, their months and virtues,
Or strange beasts that beset you,
Of birds that croak at you the Triple will?
Or of the Zodiac and how slow it turns
Below the Boreal Crown,
Prison of all true kings that ever reigned?

Water to water, ark again to ark,
From woman back to woman:
So each new victim treads unfalteringly
The never altered circuit of his fate,
Bringing twelve peers as witness
Both to his starry rise and starry fall.

Or is it of the Virgin's silver beauty,
All fish below the thighs?
She in her left hand bears a leafy quince;
When with her right she crooks a finger,
smiling,
How may the King hold back?
Royally then he barters life for love . . . .

"On Portents," another fine poem, also survives the Goddess/Riding theme, not only because of its superb language and technique, but also because the female figure in the poem is more generalized than in "To Juan at the Winter Solstice." The fact that "she" could refer to anyone is crucial to the success of the poem:

If strange things happen where she is,
So that men say that graves open
And the dead walk, or that futurity
Becomes a womb and the unborn are
shed,
Such portents are not to be wondered at,
Being tourbillions in Time made
By the strong pulling of her bladed mind
Through that ever-reluctant element.

"A Love Story" works well because in it Graves sketches a symbolic landscape—rare for him—which gives the reader an equally rare chance to get an extra-literal sense of the poet's internal emotional state:

The full moon easterly rising, furious,
Against a winter sky ragged with red;
The hedges high in snow, and owls raving—
Solemnities not easy to withstand:
A shiver wakes the spine. . . .

Much more common is Graves's literalism, which spoils many of his love poems. "Three Times in Love," "Crucibles of Love," and "Depth of Love" are almost entirely devoid of imagery. What one is left with are dry arguments that squeeze most of the inspiring passion out of the poem. Typical in this respect is "The Falcon Woman," in which love's power is depleted by Graves's purely intellectual apprehension of it:

It is hard to be a man
Whose word is his bond
In love with such a woman,

When he builds on a promise
She lightly let fall
In carelessness of spirit.

The more sternly he asks her
To stand by that promise
The faster she flies.

"The Visitation," on the other hand, succeeds because it is invigorated by an image of a living presence: "Your slender body seems a shaft of moonlight/Against the door as it gently closes . . . ."

To my mind, Graves's best poems are the early ones, the majority of which predate his post-Thirties absorption in the Goddess. "Like Snow," "The Pier Glass," "Love in Barrenness," "The Terraced Valley," and "The Cool Web" are some of the best among them. "The Cool Web," in particular —in which the poet expresses his gratefulness for the protection from reality that language affords—is exquisitely written. It is

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also compelling for the way it seems to set the stage for the later poems—the poems in which Graves seeks similar protection from a fallen world in the cold arms of an abstract Goddess:

> Children are dumb to say how hot the day is,
> How hot the scent is of the summer rose,
> How dreadful the black wastes of evening sky,
> How dreadful the tall soldiers drumming by.
>
> But we have speech, to chill the angry day,
> And speech, to dull the rose's cruel scent.
> We spell away the overhanging night,
> We spell away the soldiers and the fright.
>
> There's a cool web of language winds us in,
> Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:
> We grow sea-green at last and coldly die
> In brininess and volubility.
>
> But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,
> Throwing off language and its watery clasp
> Before our death, instead of when death comes,
> Facing the wide glare of the children's day,
> Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,
> We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.

Robert Graves never let his tongue "lose self-possession," but his worship of the Goddess prevented him from securing major status as a poet, largely because it led him to adopt an anti-metaphorical, anti-symbolical stance toward poetry. (He once characterized this in a letter as his habit of discussing things "truthfully and factually.") The limited imaginative range of his work—the "one story and one story only"—obviously owes everything to her as well.

As reductive as it was, Graves's fixation seems to have been derived from the terror of reality instilled in him as a child. Laura Riding only exacerbated an existing condition. Reading through Graves's poems, one finds oneself aching for a dose of the hated world the poet seeks protection from—even that portion of reality which is no more than "dirtiness and intrigue and lustfulness."

It is the element of "real" emotion that gives the poem "Through Nightmare" its hint of greatness. Like "On Portents," the poem is generalized enough to make the reader wonder if Graves is perhaps addressing himself, especially in the final stanza. If "Through Nightmare" is indeed Graves's confession of his timorousness in the face of the nightmare of the modern world, the poem could easily serve as his epitaph, and as a kind of lament for the unfulfilled promise of this enormously gifted, and tragically tormented, writer:

> Never be disenchanted of
> That place you sometimes dream yourself into,
> Lying at large remove beyond all dream,
> Or those you find there, though but seldom
> In their company seated—
>
> The untameable, the live, the gentle.
> Have you not known them? Whom? They carry
> Time looped so river-wise about their house
> There's no way in by history's road
> To name or number them.
>
> In your sleepy eyes I read the journey
> Of which disjointedly you tell; which stirs
> My loving admiration, that you should travel
> Through nightmare to a lost and moated land,
> Who are timorous by nature.

Becoming a literary cuss

Edgar Marquess Branch, Michael B. Frank & Kenneth M. Sanderson, editors
Mark Twain's Letters—Volume 1: 1853-1866. University of California Press, 616 pages, $35

reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

"It is torture to write a letter. And it is still greater torture to receive one—except yours & Ma's"—so young Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910) wrote to his sister Pamela in 1864. Whatever the torture, Clemens was a prolific correspondent, and in *Mark Twain's Letters—Volume 1: 1853-1866,*

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we have the commencement of a publishing venture that will present us with more than ten thousand letters, of which two thirds have never been printed before. It is a pleasure to report that, even as a youth, Twain was a humorist for all seasons.

In the present volume, covering Twain's life between the ages of seventeen and thirty-one, the young printer's devil and journeyman typesetter has left Hannibal, Missouri —his wanderlust spurred by an inconsequential quarrel with his brother Orion, whose Hannibal *Journal* taught the boy the trade. Seeking the greener pastures of St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and Keokuk and Muscatine, Iowa, young Twain supported himself by setting type in the printshops of the towns he visited between 1853-1857. He wrote home travel letters to his mother, some of which were reprinted in Orion's paper under the pseudonym Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass. (Clemens used several pseudonyms before settling on Mark Twain, one of my favorites being W. Epamonidas Adrastus Blab.)

Wanting an even larger horizon, Twain set out for Brazil in 1857 but got only as far as New Orleans, where he apprenticed himself to a riverboat pilot, Horace Bixby, who taught him to navigate the Mississippi. To master the shifting riverbanks and currents, going north and south by day and night, was a fantastic accomplishment he comically described in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). Commenting on his success, Twain wrote to his brother:

> And the young pilots, who used to tell me, patronisingly, that I could never learn the river, cannot keep from showing a little of their chagrin at seeing me so far ahead of them. Permit me to "blow my horn," for I derive a *living* pleasure from these things. And I must confess that when I go to pay my dues, I rather like to let the d—d rascals get a glimpse of a hundred dollar bill peeping out from amongst notes of smaller dimensions, whose faces I do *not* exhibit! You will despise this egotism, but I tell you there is a "stern joy" in it.

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, riverboat traffic came to a standstill and, fearful that he would be forced by the Yankees to pilot a Northern gunboat, Twain enlisted for two weeks as a Confederate irregular with Marion's Rangers, a ragtag outfit he later farcically described in "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed." Luckily, Orion was appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory, and Twain lit out with him to seek his fortune in the West. Twain's reportage for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise,* and his hardscrabble prospecting in the gold and silver mines of Nevada, are covered in this volume, which ends with Twain's failure as a prospector and his decision in 1866 to accept a call to "literature" in the East.

This edition of letters is a scholarly work of the greatest distinction: the editorial rationale for copy-text is impeccable, the annotations are wonderfully generous and detailed, a genealogy of the family is provided, Twain's calendar of steamboat runs is listed, maps of the Nevada Territory identify the mines he worked, and facsimiles of Twain's letters, along with photographs of Twain and his correspondents, festoon the text. This work, which constitutes the eighteenth volume in the comprehensive edition called *The Mark Twain Papers and Works of Mark Twain,* has been rigorously inspected by bibliographic scholars for the Center for Scholarly Editions and has been awarded their Seal, signifying that it is "an approved edition."

As the editors properly remark, Twain's "earliest letters . . . evidence the ready humor, the sure command of colloquial speech, and the keen eye for detail that characterize Mark Twain's best writing." Hannibal had already exposed him to human nature in all of its types and had developed in him that coarse buffoonery, penchant for practical joking, wild rage, and authentic native American vernacular voice that bring alive *Roughing It* (1872), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889).

The size and bustle of New York in 1853

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was a revelation to the small-town youth, who was promptly hired by John A. Gray, the printer of *Knickerbocker's* magazine, the *Jewish Chronicle,* and the *New York Recorder.* Twain couldn't stand the crowds. To reach his boardinghouse by way of Broadway, he told his mother, required him to plunge into the throng, whereupon "I am borne, and rubbed, and crowded along, and need scarcely trouble myself about using my own legs; and when I get out, it seems like I had been pulled to pieces and very badly put together again."

While working in Philadelphia, Twain visited the historic sites, and in Washington he reported home on the shenanigans in Congress: "In the House nearly every man seemed to have something weighing on his mind on which the salvation of the Republic depended, and which he appeared very anxious to ease himself of; and so there were generally half a dozen of them on the floor, and 'Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!' was echoed from every part of the house. Mr. [Thomas Hart] Benton [senator from Missouri] sits silent and gloomy in the midst of the din, like a lion imprisoned in a cage of monkeys, who, feeling his superiority, disdains to notice their chattering."

While Twain's riverboat days turned him from a callow youth into a professional man, these letters only take on real interest once Twain gets to Nevada in 1861. In Virginia City, Twain found a motley crowd of miners, sourdough prospectors, gamblers, thieves, hookers, stock swindlers, gunmen, and desperadoes. Here is how he described the "flush times" in *Roughing It:*

> The side-walks swarmed with people. The streets themselves were just as crowded with quartz-wagons, freight-teams, and other vehicles . . . . Joy sat on every countenance, and there was a glad, almost fierce, intensity in every eye that told of the money-getting schemes that were seething in every brain and the high hope that held sway in every heart. Money was as plenty as dust . . . . There were military companies, fire companies, brass bands, banks, hotels, theaters, "hurdy-gurdy houses," wide-open gambling palaces, political pow-wows, civic processions, street fights, murders, inquests, riots, a whiskey mill every fifteen steps, a dozen breweries, and half a dozen jails and station-houses in full operation, and some talk of building a church.

Territorial government in this wide-open country was something of a farce, and Twain added to the merriment by publishing newspaper satires on local political personalities. His friendships with Dan De Quille, Artemus Ward, Bret Harte, and other professional funnymen sharpened his comic gifts and made Twain popular with journalists, prospectors, and bartenders.

Twain saw this Nevada experience as the making of his literal fortune. He wrote to his sister that he never expected "to do any more piloting at any price. My livelihood must be made in this country—and if I have to wait longer than I expected, let it be so—I have no fear of failure." The letters describe his camping out in mine fields, panning for gold and silver, hunting for the rich lodes of ore, and accumulating stock in mines that just couldn't miss. The spirit of Forty-Nine overwhelmed him. "Why I have had my whiskers and moustaches so full of alkali dust that you'd have thought I worked in a starch factory and boarded in a flour barrel," he told his mother. "Two years' time will make us capitalists, in spite of anything," he boasted to Orion in 1862. He had "got the thing sifted down to a dead moral certainty": they would become rich any day. "Looks like a d—d romance, don't it?"

Always, however, there were problems. Supplies had to be teamed in, through the desert, from beyond the mountains in California. Inflation was rampant. Flour cost $100 a barrel, hay $150 a bale, and water was a scarce commodity. The roads, such as they were, he told his mother, were

> strewn thickly with the skeletons and carcasses of dead beasts of burden, and charred remains of wagons; and chains, and bolts and screws, and gun-barrels, and such things of a like

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> heavy nature as weary, thirsty emigrants, grown desperate, have thrown away, in the grand hope of being able, when less encumbered, to reach water.

Twain speculated wildly in mining shares, and, as to money, "I have spent it like a Lord," he told Orion, "& trusted to luck to get even again." His personal prospects developed no better than his mining schemes. Toward the end of his Nevada period he told his brother: "Marry be d—d. I am too old to marry. I am nearly 31. I have got gray hairs in my head. Women appear to like me, but d—n them, they don't love me."

Before he could strike it rich, Twain got into trouble with some of the leading lights in Virginia City. He made the mistake of printing a piece of buffoonery suggesting that some of the local ladies—who had proposed a fund-raising ball to support the Union Army hospitals—would divert the funds to a Miscegenation Society in the East. Their husbands bristled. He also quarreled with the editor of a rival newspaper and challenged him to a duel—a crime in itself that might have ended in a ten-year stretch in the penitentiary. In a state of deep depression, he told his sister-in-law that "if I do not get out of debt in 3 months,—pistols or poison for one—exit *me.*" He likewise told Orion that he was "tired of being a beggar—tired being chained to this accursed homeless desert,—I want to go back to a Christian land once more."

Before he escaped the Nevada authorities who might have prosecuted him, Twain went out to Jackass Hill and a nearby mining camp in Calaveras County, where he spent some time with the tall-tale, yarn-spinning prospectors. There he heard the wonderful story of Jim Smiley and his jumping frog. Revising and publishing the tale in the New York *Saturday Press* in November of 1865, at a time when American newspapers freely borrowed from each other, Twain found himself an overnight national celebrity. Broke, he had always been drawn to the pulpit and felt poised "upon the verge of the ministry or the penitentiary," but the praise of the Eastern editors made him "really begin to believe there must be something in" his "talent for humorous writing." And he announced his "call" to literature in a letter to his brother:

> I never had but two **powerful** ambitions in my life. One was to be a pilot, & the other a preacher of the gospel. I accomplished the one & failed in the other, **because** I could not supply myself with the necessary stock in trade—*i.e.* religion. I have given it up forever. I never had a "call" in that direction, anyhow, & my aspirations were the very ecstasy of presumption. But I *have* had a "call" to literature, of a low order—*i.e.* humorous. It is nothing to be proud of, but it is my strongest suit, & if I were to listen to that maxim of stern *duty* which says that to do right you **must** multiply the one or the two or the three talents which the Almighty entrusts to your keeping, I would long ago have ceased to meddle with things for which I was by nature unfitted & turned my attention to seriously scribbling to excite the **laughter** of God's creatures. Poor, pitiful business!

Accepting an assignment from the Sacramento *Union,* he was sent to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), where he spent half the year reporting on the island beauties, the volcanic landscapes, and the rites and customs of the natives and the missionaries. So hilarious was the material he developed out of this trip that he resolved to "sling a lecture" on his return to San Francisco in August of 1866. This talk was uproariously received, and a speaking tour throughout California and Nevada was demanded. To publicize his talks, his posters promised magic acts: "At a given signal," Twain promised to "go out with any gentleman and take a drink. If desired, he will repeat this unique . . . feat . . . until the audience are satisfied that there is no deception in it." He fetched them in by promising "at a moment's warning" to "depart out of town and leave his hotel bill unsettled," a sleight-of-hand act that, "performed . . . many hundreds of times, in San Francisco and elsewhere, . . .

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has always elicited the most enthusiastic comments." Before a San Jose crowd he offered to illustrate Hawaiian cannibalism by devouring a child if any lady in the audience would be so good as to furnish one. He also promised his sovereign remedy to cure children's stammering—"sawing off the child's underjaw."

Thus was born "the wild humorist of the Pacific slope," the invented persona we know as "Mark Twain," the naïve, pipe-smoking, prevaricating yarn-spinner with his deadpan drawl, disingenuous manner, and carefully timed anticlimaxes and bombshell punch-lines. As Bernard DeVoto once observed, "Mark's humor is as much style as joke and is more personality than style." There was something simply inimitable about a writer who could toss off a line like, "He had the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces," or, "I was sired by the Great American Eagle and foaled by a Continental Dam."

Twain told his mother in November of 1866, "You know the flush times are past, & it has long been impossible to more than half fill the theatre here, with any sort of attraction—but they filled it for me, night before last—full—dollar [a head] all over the house." All that remained was to take this highway-robbery business, as he called his lecture tours, to the East—which he did in 1866. He was never happy that his fame rested on humorous writing, a low order of literature, and he complained: "To think that after writing many an article a man might be excused for thinking tolerably good, those New York people should single out a villainous backwoods sketch to compliment me on—'Jim Smiley & His Jumping Frog.'" Yet three years later he could tell his future wife, "Between you & I, privately, Livy dear, it is the best humorous sketch America has produced yet, and I must read it in public some day, in order that people may know what there is in it." The American people loved it, and loved him. But his conflict over this low order of literature was such that he could also protest to George Washington Cable, another novelist-lecturer: "Oh, Cable, I am demeaning myself—I am allowing myself to be a mere buffoon. It's ghastly. I can't endure it any longer." But endure it he did: it was his forte; and, with his novels, it brought him the necessary applause, fame, and money. He knew that he was being a public fool, but, then, as he once told William Dean Howells, "I am God's fool, and all His works must be contemplated with respect."

A novelist derailed

Chinua Achebe Anthills of the Savannah. Doubleday, 216 pages, $16.95

reviewed by Brock Baker

Mr. Chinua Achebe's latest novel is his first in over twenty years. Set in an unspecified West African country called Kangan a few years after its independence from a colonial power, the book follows the careers of three former schoolmates, each of whom has become a notable in the new nation: one is an important minister in the current military government, another is the editor of the government-controlled newspaper, the third is the military dictator himself. The three soon fall out; the dictator arranges for the editor to be killed, the minister successfully flees the capital but is killed by a drunken soldier in a distant province, the dictator is deposed and killed, and another army officer takes his place.

It is a saddening fact that after extraordinary beginnings many writers of fiction do not sustain the quality of their first works. In thirty years will that be the critical conclusion about Chinua Achebe's career? His latest novel is so far removed from the excellence of his earlier ones that so hard a judgment seems almost probable. Suffice it to say that if a disinterested reader picked up *Anthills of the Savannah* as his first work by Mr. Achebe, after a few pages he would very likely dismiss both book and author once and for all. Out of my high regard for this author, I studied the novel more carefully,

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but can think of nothing to propose in its defense except this: the first twenty or so pages are in an Evelyn Waugh mode, and consequently sharp and quite funny; there is also a suggestion of a *Richard II*-type plot and setting: inside the court of a (comically) inadequate and rapidly deteriorating absolute monarch. But after this not unpromising beginning, the author veers off in another direction. Two poorly realized characters are introduced, the dictator virtually disappears from the narrative, the "inside the court" sense, as well as the sophisticated satiric tone, is dropped in favor of a sentimentalized and unconvincing retelling of the Christ story featuring the newspaper editor, interrupted intermittently by pastiches of African folk tales and songs, stream of (mythic) consciousness passages à la Gabriel García Márquez, some heavy-handed "editorials" from the supposedly blistering pen of the editor, and a long speech. In terms of literature, this is no direction at all.

In my opinion, Chinua Achebe has earned the attention of American readers by his first two books, the novels *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and *No Longer At Ease* (1960), which are still widely available in paperback.[1]

Born and educated in Nigeria when it was still part of the British Empire, Mr. Achebe learned English at an early age, although not as his native tongue, and it is the delight and competence he displays in that language that make up a good deal of the charm of these works. Another appealing characteristic (and perhaps related to the first) is a combination of earnestness of purpose and an assertive, even rebellious ambiguity of final meanings.

In *Things Fall Apart,* for instance, Mr. Achebe would seem to be conjuring up in loving detail a prototypical West African village life or culture, as it existed before the arrival and establishment of Westerners, in order to deplore what came after. (The "village," called Umuofia, is a loose federation of nine villages, whose inhabitants are all members of one "clan," a subdivision within a West African tribe or people known as the Ibo; however, these particulars are not emphasized in the novel.) The fortunes of one man, Okonkwo, unite the chapters, but the daily activities of all the members of the village are made much of and several other characters assume prominence: notably, the youngest of his three wives, another village "elder," Okonkwo's eldest son, and his maternal uncle. In the last quarter of the book the virtually simultaneous introduction of Christianity and British political authority, in the form of a missionary who builds a church in the village and "the District Commissioner" who sets up a colonial outpost in a town a few miles away, swiftly leads to drastic dislocations of the patterns and hierarchies of Umuofia's daily round, and the reader, through the author's skills, is made to feel how sickening such dislocations were to many of the clansmen.

Okonkwo, who has been exiled for seven years to his mother's native village on account of having accidentally killed another village member, returns to find this changed state of affairs, and is very upset. He proposes drastic remedies—burning the church, for instance—but his kinsmen hesitate. Shortly thereafter he is himself tricked and humiliated by the District Commissioner, kills one of the latter's employees in an uncontrollable rage, then kills himself in despair, by this last act violating one of his people's most solemn taboos.

These interweaving stories, about the apparent destruction of an admirable way of life and of a promising individual career within it, would appear to serve the same obvious end: the indictment of a colonial Western power's disrespect toward an honorable and perhaps even superior alternative to its own way of doing things. However, something more complicated is going on here. Okonkwo, although portrayed from the start in heroic terms, is also presented as profoundly flawed. In other words, he himself, not the depredations of the colonialists, is the primary author of his own disgraceful

1 *Things Fall Apart* (192 pages, $2.95) and *No Longer At Ease* (159 pages, $2.95) are available in Fawcett editions.

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end. In addition, certain aspects of that village culture are questioned; for instance, the harsh exclusion from any rights or dignities of a certain group called *osu*; or the murder by exposure of all sets of twins born to the clan. But again, Mr. Achebe forbears any formulaic response, or easy symbolism. It is Okonkwo's friend and fellow elder, a strong supporter of Umuofia's traditions, who is troubled by the murder of the children, not a scoffer or a modernizer or an outsider. On the other hand, many of the missionary's first converts are *osu*: the Church has no room for a conception of exclusion, preaches that sympathetically presented character. And one of the first acts of the new church people is to rescue the abandoned children Okonkwo's friend worried over, and to raise them among themselves. The intrusion of the West in the form of Christianity therefore has something to be said for it, the author is conveying, even while that intrusion, especially in political and economic terms, introduces new, destructive elements into the centuries-old, self-sufficient, and in many ways objectively admirable village culture, with its attendant animist religious beliefs and practices. This complexity of response is what I mean by a "rebellious ambiguity of final meanings." Mr. Achebe will not be cowed by the currently prevalent reflex condemnation of colonialism into saying more than he can honestly feel to be true as one individual sympathizing with the plight of other individuals, who are his characters. By resisting formulas, obvious symbolism, blanket condemnations (or endorsements), he confronts the reader with genuine conundrums instead of serving up the emotional and political pablum which so many writers in both fiction and nonfiction have made out of historical and present-day collisions of cultures.

The second Achebe novel is admirable for similar reasons. *No Longer At Ease* concerns the rise and fall of a young Ibo in the Nigeria of the late 1950s, the last two or three years before independence. He is called Obi Okonkwo; his father was one of his people's earliest Christian converts and his grandfather the unhappy suicide in *Things Fall Apart*. Because of his exceptional performance in national exams, Obi has been chosen by the elders of his village to go to college in England: they want him to become a lawyer and help the village in land disputes with its neighbors. But Obi is a headstrong youth; he studies English instead. His kinsmen welcome him back anyway and arrange for a job in the "senior branch" of the civil service in Lagos, still run by the British, where Nigerians are supposed to be learning how to run a modern nation. These jobs are highly prized among all Nigerians: those who hold them receive high salaries, a superior place to live, long paid vacations, etc. Obi feels he is on top of the world. However, his ambition to be completely modern, to conduct both his professional and his private life without any reference to the traditions of his village, soon gets him into trouble. For instance, he cannot endure his parents' horror at the prospect of his marrying a member of the *osu* and he gives her up even though she has become pregnant and must undergo a nearly fatal abortion. He also gets into financial trouble. In his headstrong way, he has immediately made too many financial commitments, including a larger monthly payment than is customary to the village council of elders to pay back its loan to him for his overseas education. Other obligations include a stipend to his family back home, the cost of a younger brother's schooling, a new car, etc. There are also unexpected expenses such as income tax and car insurance. In short, he becomes desperate for money.

One of the characteristics of the new hybrid culture within which Obi now lives—an unlovely mixture of traditional and colonially fostered "national" values—is the prevalence of bribery, sustained by an expectation among kinsmen of mutual aid and a general non-comprehension of the importance of honest administration if a modern state is to succeed. Obi initially is determined to resist these pressures and tries to get others to do the same. But driven to the

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wall, he resists no longer, and begins taking bribes himself. Yet even at this low point of his ambition, Obi is subject to the compulsions of his pride. He refuses to find out how such things are done, is a little too indiscreet for the system to bear, and is arrested, by this public disgrace confirming the poor opinion of "African" self-discipline held by his cynical British boss, Mr. Green.

These are fine novels, on difficult and unusual subjects. The type of wisdom fiction can provide on political and social matters is to be found in them. They are sad but never mawkish, eloquent but never rhetorical, their complexities preserved from demagoguery by their author's unfaltering creative will. By these first works Mr. Achebe has proved himself one of those rare writers able to make art out of the intractable materials of public discourse. One can only hope that he will be able to do so again.

Rodin in the round

Frederic V. Grunfeld Rodin: A Biography. Henry Holt, 738 pages, $35

reviewed by Denys Sutton

Visitors to the Musée Rodin in the rue de l'Université, Paris, require little persuasion that Rodin remains an exceedingly popular artist whose appeal to the very young—young lovers as much as anyone else—is considerable. He is one of the best known of all artists, and extensive collections of his sculpture exist in Philadelphia and San Francisco, as well as in Paris and Meudon. His work has been widely exhibited, not least in Japan, where four or five shows have been staged in recent years.

Evidence of Rodin's hold upon the public is provided by the copious bibliography appended to *Rodin-Studien* (1983), which lists over two thousand items. It might seem as if most aspects of this protean artist's activity would have been examined by now, and yet important questions await answers. His influence on his contemporaries and later sculptors remains to be assessed, for instance, as does the reaction against his art that occurred even before his death.

Despite the interest taken in Rodin, no substantial biography of him has been published in our time up to now. The reason for this is relatively simple. Until only a few years ago access to the voluminous archives in the Musée Rodin was strictly limited. As this reviewer well knows, it was impossible to secure precise information about even such fundamental matters as Rodin's collection of antiquities. (Rodin was a passionate buyer of classical art, even if his eye was far from infallible.) Fortunately the situation at the Musée Rodin has improved, as a series of "in-house" exhibitions—devoted to his collection, his connections with men of letters, and his love of the Far East—have helped to clarify specific aspects of his life and work. What is more, two volumes of his correspondence have been issued by the museum.

The time is propitious, then, for a fresh biographical study of Rodin. This taxing task has been accomplished by the late Frederic V. Grunfeld. It is sad that he did not live long enough to read the tributes that have been paid to his diligence and pertinacity.

Mr. Grunfeld was not an art historian. Rather, he belonged to that fast disappearing species: the general writer who is able to turn his hand to many different subjects. Before this biography, Mr. Grunfeld produced travel articles, a volume on Kafka, Einstein, and Freud, and a book called *Games of the World*. That his biography of Rodin is imbued with considerable common sense is shown in his welcome refusal to indulge in the jejune psychological interpretations that are often found in modern biographies (the homoerotic theme is now a favorite), and he was quite uncontaminated by a fashionable Marxist-tinged reading of "the artist in context."

Mr. Grunfeld possessed an inquiring mind, and his nose for unpublished material led him to tap private archives that in most cases

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had remained undisturbed for many years. He made excellent use of the letters written by the Scottish artist Ottilie Mclaren to her fiancé William Wallace; the correspondence of Eve Fairfax (the daughter of Colonel Thomas Fairfax of the Grenadier Guards); and the memoirs of Jeanne Russell (the daughter of the Australian painter John Russell, whose Italian wife, Marianna Antonietta Mattiocco, inspired one of Rodin's most beautiful sculptures). He also consulted the diary kept by one of Rodin's last confidantes, Victoria Sackville-West, the illegitimate daughter of the Spanish gypsy dancer Pepita and Lionel Sackville-West. (Unfortunately, there is no reference in the book to an important article by Benedict Nicolson on Lady Sackville and Rodin which appeared in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1970.)

Born in 1840, Rodin lived to a great age (he died in 1917) and knew many people. The references to him in published and unpublished documents are thus considerable. It is vital for a biographer to assess the value of the sources that date from various periods of his life, and to reconcile conflicting statements. In this respect, too, a biographer must reckon with the confusion caused by the sculptor Victor Frisch, who published a controversial book on Rodin in 1939. Purportedly a biography, it included statements by Rodin that were as harmful to the artist's reputation as were the fake "Rodin" drawings made by the notorious nineteenth-century forger Ernst Durig.

Mr. Grunfeld, who had the advantage of knowing Edward Varèse, a former pupil of Rodin's, was too level-headed to be carried away by fanciful and highfalutin interpretations. One wonders at times whether he relied too much on such witnesses as Aleister Crowley (a bad poet and diabolist who claimed to be the "Beast from the Book of Revelation") or, for that matter, Edmond de Goncourt, who loved gossip. But on the whole he used his source material skillfully. Like other writers about Rodin, Mr. Grunfeld rightly trusted the articles of Truman H. Bartlett. Bartlett, an American sculptor and critic, was the first person to write systematically about Rodin; in 1889 he published an account of the sculptor's life and work in lengthy installments in *American Architect and Building News*. Bartlett's articles were based on personal knowledge and form the most circumstantial texts for our knowledge of the artist's early life. It is a sign of the American enthusiasm for modern French art that Bartlett's pieces on Rodin—like Edward Wheelwright's on Millet in the 1870s—provide a fundamental source for the interpretation of a leading French master.

Bartlett did not use all his material in his account on Rodin: Mr. Grunfeld found among Bartlett's papers a hitherto unpublished statement by Rodin on the sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye. Rodin compared Barye —with whom he had studied when he was fifteen—to the Assyrians, noting that he was not liked in France because he was too strong. "He is so great that his contemporaries can't stand him." Although Mr. Grunfeld draws attention to Rodin's artistic masters—Rodin was always generous about acknowledging these—he does not examine his subject's interest in history. Rodin is said to have attended the lectures delivered by Michelet and Quinet at the Collège de France.

Mr. Grunfeld's ambition to base his biography on as many eyewitness testimonies as possible necessarily makes his book a long one, over seven hundred pages, in fact. Our generation tends to favor large-scale biographies—Leon Edel's on Henry James and Richard Ellmann's on James Joyce come to mind—but it is tempting to feel that judicious pruning would not have come amiss. Do readers really require a disquisition, however interesting, on the Paris police force just because Rodin's father was one of its members?

This is not to say that many of his details fail to fascinate; for instance, he informs us in a footnote about the number of artists' models working in Paris in 1880; these included forty-five British and thirty American girls; a third of the models were Italian.

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They found work at the Marché des Modèles, held every Monday morning in the Place Pigalle, and an agency was opened for them in 1885. These girls, who were mostly under twenty-five, were "available." As Zola declared, "one draws them by day and cuddles them by night, but perhaps the word cuddle is too mild."

This familiarity with social background and with contemporary literature contributes to the value of Mr. Grunfeld's book. Rodin's long attachment to Rose Beuret, whom he married at the very end of her life, is handled with understanding. Like other artists of his period—Degas for one—Rodin was not cut out for marriage; he believed that even living with a mistress could be a trap. After Rodin read Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee* in 1901, Mr. Grunfeld writes, "it occurred to him that he too had been victimized by a queen bee." He quotes Rodin as saying, "In human life the man sacrifices himself for the woman and is ruined by her . . . ." In this regard, Rodin was a man of his age. His fear of marriage—a condition whereby a woman, he thought, could permanently dominate him and stifle his art—was a reflection of the "Fatal Woman complex" so characteristic of nineteenth-century creative artists.

Be this as it may, Rodin's temperament led him into many adventures: his sexual appetite remained strong until an advanced age. One of his most sustained affairs was with Camille Claudel, the sister of Paul Claudel, the poet and diplomat. Herself a sculptress, she was infatuated with Rodin and, as Mr. Grunfeld discovered, bore him two children, who were educated in England. (The story ended tragically with her being confined to an asylum.) In addition, Gwen John, Augustus John's sister, was deeply in love with Rodin and suffered on his account, while the Irish sculptress Nuala O'Donel, though never his lover, killed herself owing to his alleged indifference to her.

Yet if Rodin turned the heads of many women, others saw him with more skeptical eyes. Madame de Noailles, the poetess, while according him due hero worship, noted: "He smells of wine, it's as though he were in a dreamlike fog but at the same time he has a sly eye." Her account of her meetings with Rodin reveals that he was not shy about showing women—even a woman of her class—his erotic drawings and sculpture.

Rodin could get bored with his adorers, even with one who did so much for him as the Duchesse de Choiseul. Born Claire Coudert, she was a forceful New Yorker whose father was a well-known lawyer. (One of her sisters was Mrs. Condé Nast, the wife of the publisher of *Vogue*.) Madame de Choiseul's brusque manners put off many of Rodin's friends. She took to the bottle and would perform a bedraggled dance, "le bourrée," before her aging Pasha. Eventually he showed her the door and her poor husband's attempt to intercede on her behalf was to no avail. Before the breakup, though, the Duchess, who had a strong commercial streak, set about marketing her lover's works, so that his annual income rose from 60,000 to 400,000 francs—a considerable sum in those days. She handled sales at Rodin's studio at the Dépôt de Marbres, where she would take visitors round, especially rich Americans.

Mr. Grunfeld's book contains valuable details about Rodin's appeal to French clients—one of the first wealthy ones being Alphonse de Rothschild—and about the growth of Rodin's reputation. The development of an artist into a "star" is always a fascinating topic and Rodin's eager acceptance of this role is admirably charted; friends such as Judith Cladel, the author of various books on Rodin, including *Rodin, Sa vie glorieuse, sa vie inconnue* (1936), helped him with public relations and with his participation in international exhibitions.

Before Rodin, Houdon had built up a large foreign clientele, American, German, and Russian; later, in Rome, Thorwaldsen formed an even greater circle of admirers. But with Rodin the "industrialization" of sculpture—and its international marketing—more or less came into its own. He was a fashionable artist, one of the few avant-garde ones to be so at the time. His work

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appealed to a number of Americans, who by the 1890s constituted a major force in the appreciation of modern art. One of his early American patrons was the financier Charles T. Yerkes, who was, like Rodin, a compulsive womanizer. Rodin's work also appealed to a very different type of American—the proper Bostonian Henry Adams. When in Paris in 1895, he considered acquiring one of the sculptor's bronze figures. "They are mostly so sensually suggestive," he wrote, "that I shall have to lock them up when any girls are about, which is awkward; but Rodin is the only degenerate artist I know of whose work is original." In the event, he visited the sculptor's studio, ruminated on his favorite theme of decadence, but purchased nothing.

Art promotion is apt to be considered an innovation of our time, but in this respect Rodin was a leader, and he was greatly aided by the interpretations of his art advanced by sympathetic art critics such as Gustave Geffroy, the biographer of Monet. Rodin's correspondence, as well as the details provided in this book, indicate the extent of his fame; he visited Prague; Vienna, where he met Gustave Klimt; London, where he adored being fêted by society ladies; and Rome, where he sculpted Pope Benedict XV—a by no means satisfactory encounter, it seems, as the busy Pope was extremely reluctant to sit for him.

Rodin had numerous devotees in Germany, too, one of them being the art collector August Thyssen (not a Baron, by the way, as Grunfeld maintains). Nevertheless, the show organized in 1906 by Count Kessler at the Weimar Art Museum was fiercely attacked by a local professor of painting. As a result, Kessler was obliged to resign from his post as director and modern art was thereafter excluded from the museum.

Mr. Grunfeld's account of Rodin's relations with English patrons and critics is in general admirable, although there are lapses. Rather more could have been said about the generally favorable opinions of Sir Claude Phillips, the art critic of the *Daily Telegraph* and all-round connoisseur who became Keeper of the Wallace Collection. Sir Charles Dilke was more than a writer about the British Army and the Empire; he was a gifted politician who failed to win election to Parliament owing to the scandal aroused by his being cited as a correspondent in a notorious divorce case in 1885-6. Edward Perry Warren, an expatriate American who resided in England, was not so much a collector as a classical-art dealer who sold many items (including the Ludovisi altar) to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Mr. Grunfeld's aim is not to analyze Rodin's art or the reasons for its appeal; nevertheless, the comments he cites help to explain the intoxicating effects which Rodin's art had on some of his contemporaries. Helene von Hindenburg, later Countess von Nostitz, was enthralled when she and her mother saw the "Rodin Pavilion" at the "Paris 1900" exhibition. She wrote in her memoirs: "We gazed at the two embracing figures around which the universe seemed to revolve, *Amour et Printemps*. And then something strange happened to me. Waves of light seemed to envelop the marble. For the first time in my life I was so deeply affected by a piece of sculpture that my eyes filled with tears." Her experience was crowned when on the following day she again visited the show: Rodin "quietly gave" her "a small pink rose he had picked in Meudon."

The details accumulated by Mr. Grunfeld present the picture of a hard-working man who had made his own way, a hopeless philanderer who remained devoted to his old Rose (who would even wait at table on him), and a determined egotist. That in later years he became swollen-headed was hardly surprising in view of his position as a guru of art. In this connection, the Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre supplies an amusing account of Rodin's appearance before a female audience that had assembled to hear him lecture on French cathedrals. When the time came for him to speak, Judith Cladel stood in for him, reading a banal text that "was surely not by Rodin." Then, according to the Duchess,

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> the maître rose, caressing his long beard, to add a few words, and launched into a strange hour-long tirade comparing the Gothic cathedral to the body of a woman, and using a most sensuous image to illustrate his point . . . . The effect on the auditorium full of pious women was devastating. Hysterical mothers hustled their daughters out of the hall; [the writer] Fernand Laudet was obliged to compose a circular offering our excuses for this distressing misunderstanding between Rodin and his audience.

The scene could have provided a theme for a farce by Feydeau.

Much of interest appears in Mr. Grunfeld's book concerning Rodin's methods and the role of the assistants—the *practiciens*—who cut his sculpture. Even as early as 1880 he told Truman Bartlett that the only way a sculptor can "insure the exact reproduction of a model in marble is to do the work himself. But this method is practically impossible, because he cannot afford to do it for the prices he receives." It is a wry comment on artistic practice that Rodin should have allowed his assistants license in translating his models into the finished work so as to restore an element of freshness to his marbles. Nevertheless, one eyewitness, Malvina Hoffman, herself a sculptress, categorically stated that she had seen Rodin "carving his own marbles at his studio . . . ."

Rodin's roots were in the past, in classical and Renaissance art as well as in the long French tradition; in his early days his debt to the Rococo is clear. He also delighted in the Baroque. (An account of this connection remains to be written.) On his trip to Spain in 1905, he did not take to El Greco (fast becoming a fashionable Old Master who was appreciated by Degas and Sargent) but responded to the architecture of José Churriguera, as well as to Spanish wine, which he subsequently served at his own table.

Although deeply indebted to earlier art, Rodin was by no means a pasticheur. His originality is seen in such remarkable works as the *Balzac*. And many of his small figures catch movement and reflect a love of consciously created fragments that also express his love of form. This is the achievement of *The Gates of Hell*. This centerpiece of his art shows as well Rodin's stylistic relationship to Art Nouveau (in particular its tendency to use flowing movement), which dominated the final years of the nineteenth century, to a greater extent, it must be said, than Impressionism.

Certain aspects of Rodin's art no longer appeal to modern taste, including the late "blond" marble sculpture (which emulated early Greek sculpture). It has to be recalled that such work greatly attracted his contemporaries on account of its elegance and hint of "spiritual" awareness; here, it was felt, was an art attached to the past yet in touch with a certain "modern" mood. And to a certain extent this is true. The combination of sentiment and sensuality won the hearts of the upper-class aesthetes of the *fin de siècle*. The novels of Paul Bourget, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Maurice Baring, to take convenient examples, underline the extent to which elevated feelings were then a part of life.

Nowadays Rodin casts his spell largely owing to his dexterous modeling, the sensual quality of his imagery, the insight of his portraiture and his drawings. But his grand rhetorical manner should not be overlooked. It may shed more light on his art than is realized by the supporters of pure form alone.

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Notebook

The other Rothko scandal

by Eric Gibson

Ten years ago, the name of Mark Rothko featured prominently in the news when his children brought suit against his executors—as it turned out, successfully—for defrauding the Rothko estate. Now a Rothko scandal is before us once again, thanks to an exhibition at Harvard University's Arthur M. Sackler Museum entitled "Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals."[1] What the Sackler has put on view is nothing less than the pitiful remnants of six mural-sized paintings that were given by Rothko to the university in 1965 and then left to molder in a room inadequately shielded from sunlight.

The paintings were allowed to fade so badly in the years after their installation that they soon bore only the most schematic relation to their original state, and were finally removed to storage in 1979. This exhibition, mounted under the auspices of Harvard's Center for Conservation and Technical Studies and including Rothko's painted sketches for the murals, does not showcase a restoration—the paintings were too far gone for that by the time of their removal—but documents the research into the causes of the deterioration. Once the exhibition closes in October, the paintings can never be placed on public view again, lest they deteriorate even more. Though one was prepared in some respects for the Sackler exhibition—the fate of Rothko's Harvard murals has been an open secret for some time—it still came as a shock. For anyone who loves painting, the present condition of the murals makes for a wretched, sickening spectacle.

Rothko's murals were painted to adorn a sort of executive dining room in a new building designed by the Spanish architect Josep Lluis Sert. (Sert is best known for his Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exposition of 1937, in which Picasso's *Guernica* was first seen publicly.) The original idea had called for two or three moderately scaled paintings, but Rothko wanted to create a total environment, a multi-part suite large enough to cover almost all the available wall space and dominate the room, and the university agreed. In the final installation, three panels—a rectangular one flanked by two square ones—hung in a deep niche on one long side of the room. On the opposite wall, flanking the entrance, were two other panels, also square and rectangular. The two end walls consisted entirely of windows.

In all the paintings the motif is identical. In place of his characteristic superimposed rectangles, Rothko employed broad vertical bands, two in each small painting and three in the larger ones. These were joined at top and bottom by thinner horizontals, each with a smallish rectangular form in its middle. Originally the ground color in all was a

1 "Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals" opened at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum on August 6 and was on view until October 2. A catalogue, edited by Marjorie B. Cohn, is available for $19.95.

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deep crimson, while the rectangular "figures" were variously vermilion, pink, rust, and blue-black. Under the terms of the gift, the group could neither be broken up nor moved from the room without the permission of the artist or a designated representative.

Almost from the day they were installed, the paintings began to deteriorate. The building's axis ran almost precisely north-south, and with windows in place of walls, this meant a constant bombardment of sunlight against the canvases. Serious enough in itself (daylight is either excluded from or carefully rationed in most museums to minimize the deleterious effect of its ultraviolet rays), this problem was compounded by the artist's working method. Rothko was indifferent to the technical aspects of painting, and the red he mixed with blue to get the deep crimson ground color was so "fugitive"—light-sensitive—that it immediately began to fade, and has since been dropped from the inventories of art-supply stores. Special light-filtering curtains were installed in front of the windows at the time of the gift, but they proved to be insufficient and were, in any event, only infrequently drawn. In addition, the paintings were damaged by spilled food and by furniture and people brushing against their unprotected surfaces. (When not used as a dining room, the room was the setting for crowded social events including, on at least one occasion, a disco party.) As if this weren't enough, security was so lax that a vandal was once able to scratch his name into one of the canvases. The first alarums were sounded in 1967, a mere five years after installation. But it wasn't until 1979 that the murals were taken down, by which time the damage was overwhelming and irreversible.

At the Sackler, the paintings appear as they must have looked the day they were removed in 1979. Ironically, the visitor possessing only a casual familiarity with the artist's work, and uninterested in reading the wall text at the entrance, will be hard put to find anything wrong. Certainly what one sees is physically intact, and, after all, it does *look* like Rothko's work. And the inclusion of the preparatory sketches, along with the presentation of the paintings in a full-scale mock-up of the original room, gives the impression that the suite of paintings is being publicly shown prior to being permanently sequestered in its exclusive location.

To anyone else, however, the reality of the matter is all too visible. Only one small area of canvas is as it was in 1963. This is an upper corner of the panel farthest from the windows, an area about two feet square representing less than one percent of the total area of the series. A vermilion "figure" acts on the crimson ground to transform it from flat pigmented surface to a deep, hazy space. In turn, it is irradiated by the crimson as if it were reflecting brilliant light from an invisible source somewhere within the red atmosphere. The studies are an equally compelling—if more tentative—testament to what's been lost. The thirty that were included in the exhibition are roughly six-by-seven-inch trial drawings on plum-colored paper, with various color combinations and saturations using the final motif. Despite their small size, and their liquid, improvisational handling, they have all the monumentality of finished canvases.

There's a view of Rothko that sees him as the modern heir to Caspar David Friedrich, the nineteenth-century German romantic painter. In this view, Rothko is an artist striving to express some union between man and the spiritual forces in nature. For me, though, Rothko's paintings never quite take the viewer to that higher plane. His subject seems closer to the self—his own self—than to anything outside man. The paintings' universality expresses not so much a yearning toward a larger power as an idea of the human condition arrived at through painful self-awareness. He's more like Rembrandt than Friedrich, in other words, and we glimpse all of that in the patch of undamaged canvas, and in the paper sketches. The tragedy of the Harvard murals is that a glimpse is now all we'll ever have. The experience is like standing before a portion of

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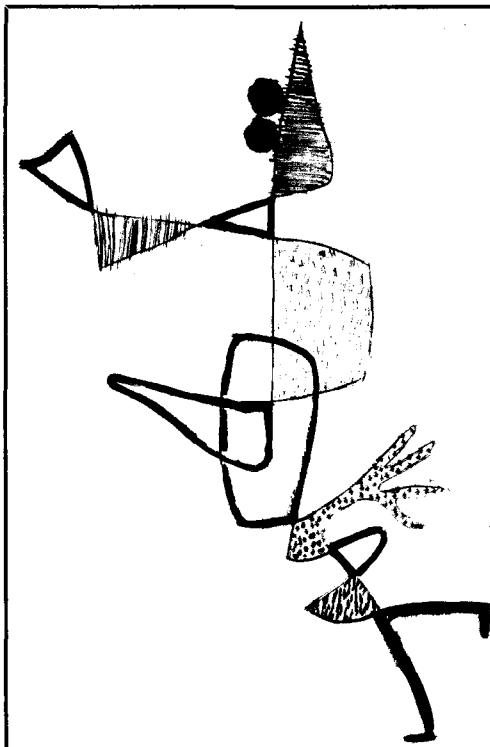
an antique wall painting and having to imagine the splendid whole it stands for.

For elsewhere, the ravages are clearly visible. At the very least, there is a noticeable shift toward mauve in the ground color, though some vestiges of the original crimson remain. At its most drastic, the transformation is shocking. In the canvas that was closest to the south window, Rothko's crimson ground has been bleached a shade of cobalt blue, while the original pink "figure" is now plaster white. It's a change as radical and chilling as that which occurs in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray,* and, as we shall see, one quite as revealing about its owner. And with the color gone, space and mood are gone as well. The imagery is so playing-card flat that some of the paintings look as though a clumsy apprentice or imitator had futilely attempted to duplicate the artist's style. Though physically whole, the paintings are, to all intents and purposes, destroyed. What we have at Harvard is a kind of carcass, the ravaged remains of a once vital artistic idea in its final public appearance before permanent interment, the victim of neglect.

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition is admirably thorough in its documentation of the state of the paintings, and forthright about the reasons for their ghastly deterioration. Yet one can't help remarking how fortuitous—or perhaps shrewd?—it was for the exhibition to come to us under the Center's auspices, for it deftly rendered moot any question of accountability. After all, when one shows the lengths to which one has gone to halt damage and right a wrong, what's to be gained by pointing the finger? At the end of her catalogue essay Marjorie B. Cohn, the Center's chief conservator, even advises us that "[j]udgment today on the circumstances and consequences of yesterday is futile." Certainly *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* subscribed to this view, addressing the question of responsibility hardly at all. *Newsweek*'s reporter even managed to draw her own peculiar lesson from the debacle, observing that, "[i]f the evanescence of the colors suggest[s] that



El Lissitzky, *Proun,* 1919/20

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art is no more immortal than the artist who makes it, [then] the tragic spirit of these works is stronger than ever."

The tone of the catalogue and the wall texts is disturbingly disinterested, with all sentiments of chagrin or responsibility handily dispelled by the reassuring perspective of scholarly detachment. Considering that Rothko's paintings deteriorated through the negligence of the university authorities, a statement of explanation and apology at the beginning of the catalogue from the university's president would have been appropriate. But of course it was nowhere to be found. Instead the cleaning crew was sent out to mop up with the hope that nobody would pay them much notice.

In fairness to the Harvard Art Museums, of which the Fogg, the Busch-Reisinger, and the Sackler all form a part, their officials are not to blame. Indeed, it is one of the many tragic ironies informing the whole business that repeated warnings and entreaties from successive directors of the Fogg to representatives of the university administration (everyone from the secretary of the Harvard Corporation to members of the real estate department) went unheeded. Once, in 1975—this would be comic were it not an indication of how desperate the situation had become—Seymour Slive, then director of the Fogg, felt compelled to write to the chief janitor and head dietician of the building pleading with them to take care with the paintings. All to no avail. The murals were left to deteriorate.

Some of this fumbling was certainly due to the strictures imposed by the original deed of gift, which prevented the paintings from being moved anywhere. But it was also the result of bureaucratic inertia. Rothko, who certainly bears some of the responsibility, was contacted by the university, but was only asked what sort of paint he had used. No one thought to ask his permission to move the paintings, even temporarily, to a safer locale. And once Rothko was dead, and his estate in litigation, whatever small inclination there was on Harvard's part to act evaporated completely. This must be some kind of record for negligence and self-interest on the part of an institution charged with looking after a work of art. And it is made even more scandalous by the fact that it occurred at one of the nation's most respected universities, one renowned for its art collections and its teaching of art history. The only conclusion one can come to about Harvard's stewardship of the Rothko murals is that from the beginning it decided it would rather leave the paintings to deteriorate than risk a lawsuit by acting in an honest effort to save them. Let's hope they teach different ethics at the Medical School.

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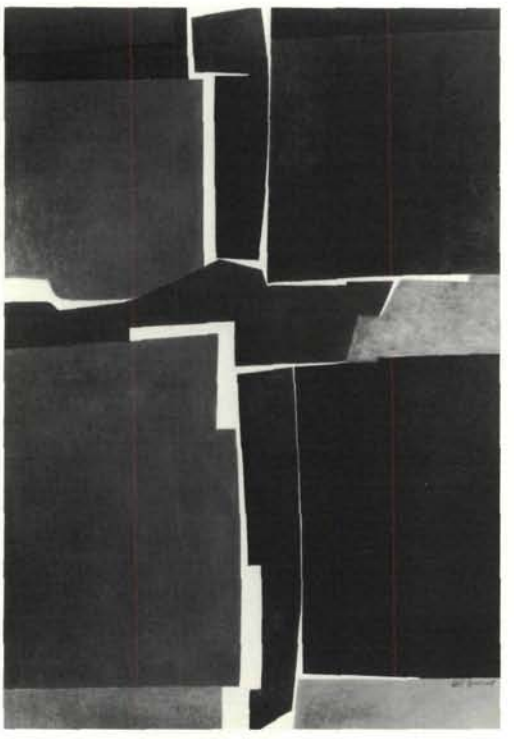

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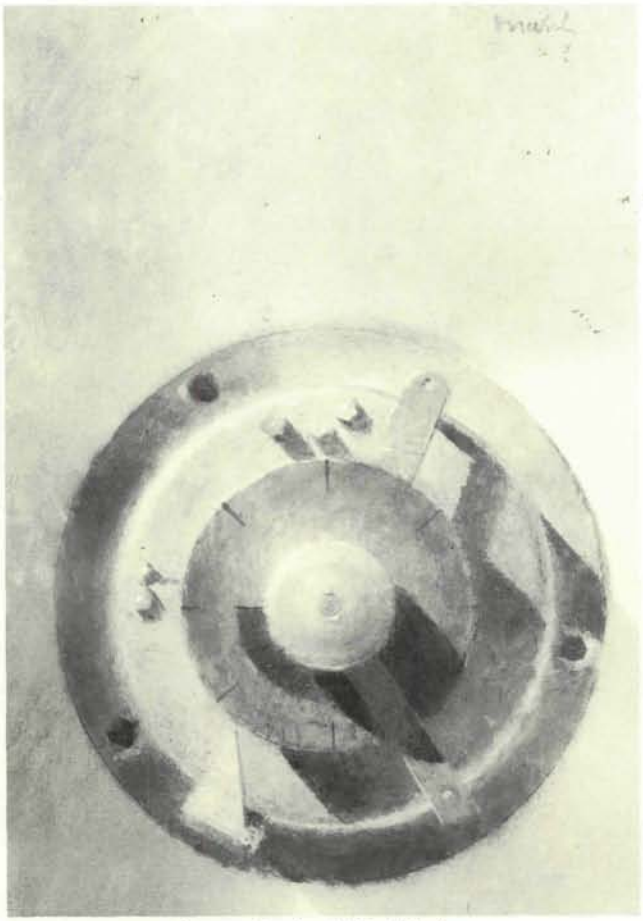

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